

# *Conceptualism and the Aesthetics of Meaning\**

## *El conceptualismo y la estética del significado*

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### RESUMEN

Desde que en los años 60 la producción artística más relevante rechazara la teoría estética modernista, se ha cuestionado si la estética tenía realmente algo que ver con el arte. Diversas formas de cognitivismo en filosofía del arte han acompañado al conceptualismo que, en un sentido amplio, ha fundamentado la mayoría de las prácticas neovanguardistas. Sin embargo, la relación entre el arte y la estética ha sido redefinida sobre distintas bases. Este artículo se centra en la reciente «estética del significado» de Danto para contestar la tesis conceptualista que afirma que la estética es irrelevante para la crítica y el valor del arte actual.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

CONCEPTUALISMO ARTÍSTICO, PROPIEDADES ESTÉTICAS,  
BELLEZA INTERNA, DANTO

### ABSTRACT

Since the most relevant artistic production rejected modernist aesthetic theory in the 60s, there has been discussion about the question of whether aesthetics had really anything to do with art at all. Various forms of cognitivism in the philosophy of art developed accompanying the conceptualism that, broadly speaking, has been at the core of most neo-avantgarde practices. However, the interrelationship between art and aesthetics has been reviewed on different

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basis. This paper focuses on recent Danto's «aesthetics of meaning» in order to dispute the conceptualist thesis which states that aesthetics is irrelevant for the criticism and the value of contemporary art.

KEYWORDS

ARTISTIC CONCEPTUALISM, AESTHETIC PROPERTIES,  
INTERNAL BEAUTY, DANTO

I. INTRODUCTION

FOR A LONG TIME, Arthur Danto has notably defended a philosophical definition of art detached from aesthetics. Nonetheless, in his book *The abuse of Beauty*, Danto reviewed his previous conception on the role that aesthetic properties could play in the art of today. In that book, Danto admitted that his 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. The aesthetic theory of art, as the very influential art critic Clement Greenberg defended it, connected certain conception of aesthetics to the modernist theory of art. Greenberg 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. However, while Greenbergian formalism linked artistic value to aesthetic experience as contemplation of the «aesthetic» object (whose significance lies in just what strikes the eye), many artists and artistic movements repudiated the aesthetic theory as an adequate basis for understanding artistic value or significance. As Danto remembers, «the artists that mattered philosophically were preeminently Duchamp and Warhol, Eva Hesse, the minimalists, and the conceptualists, in whose work aesthetics was of negligible significance».<sup>1</sup> Inside that artistic revolutionary shift, the challenge of Conceptual Art defined as an art of the *mind*, instead of the *senses*, was particularly relevant. Strictly speaking, «conceptual art» covers a very short historical framework.<sup>2</sup> But the idea of an art made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions extended and so there is a broader use of the label «conceptualism» that refers to an artistic attitude towards artistic representation, the nature and the function of art, derived from the conceptual practices of the 60s and 70s, which became the basis of all-encompassing

1 A. C. Danto, 2007, p. 25.

2 1968–72, associated with both Joseph Kosuth and Art & Language.

contemporary artistic practices in visual art. In certain sense, «conceptualism is postmodernism».<sup>3</sup>

The artists of that time rejected the aesthetic definition of art, rejected taste and aesthetic quality and aimed to produce an art not to be aesthetically pleasing, but drawing attention to its meaning, and to its lack of formal interest.<sup>4</sup> They did it hoping to give back to art some of its political critical potential too and setting up an anti-aesthetic mainstream that still persists today. Danto joined that anti-aesthetic mainstream and, against modernism, claimed that what was visually discernible about works of art no longer enabled one to distinguish between works of art and other objects.<sup>5</sup> The conceptualism and the pluralism established by the art of the 60s urged to find a new definition of art and, in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto argued that the two necessary conditions for a philosophical definition of art were that art is about something and hence possesses meaning, and that an artwork embodies its meaning, which is what art criticism addresses.<sup>6</sup>

Aesthetic properties 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. 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».<sup>7</sup>

## II. RE-EXAMINING AESTHETICS

Of course, Danto is not the only one that has reviewed the interrelationship between art and the aesthetic since the conceptual divorce between them provoked a major crisis in the definition and appreciation of art. Jean-Marie Schaeffer points out that at least part of the debate among philosophical discourses about art has taken place in the context of the «legitimation crisis» in contemporary art.<sup>8</sup> 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 on art.<sup>9</sup> Although as a discipline the task of aesthetics is nothing

3 C. Nae, 2011, p. 222.

4 See C. Harrison and P. Wood, 1993.

5 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.

6 A. C. Danto, 1981.

7 A. C. Danto, 2003, pp. 58-59.

8 J.-M. Schaeffer, 2000, p. 3.

9 Practising what he calls «aesthetics as philosophical doctrine», which authorizes phi-

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 between a cognitive and an affective component. In the aesthetic relation, the cognitive discrimination of the object is accompanied by some satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, according to which it is valued.<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, any artwork may be aesthetic in the sense that it may be part of an aesthetic relation. But similarly, aesthetic relations and value are not to be found only in connection with artworks. In conclusion, the fields of the aesthetic and that of art are just different, and their relationship should be thoroughly redefined on the basis of their respective autonomy.

However, for Schaeffer, not only to the ambition of philosophy is to be blamed for the contamination of the relationship between art and aesthetics, but also «the speculative tradition» (which runs from Jena Romanticism to Heidegger) that turned art into a way of access to a kind of truth and identified art as a sort of philosophy. This tradition would have misunderstood art from the outset and helped philosophers to think that they had the right to legitimate art and justify its practice. Therefore, Schaeffer proposes a philosophical «de-sacralization» of art, defending «laicism» and claiming that artistic pleasure, not revelation, is the source of the value of art.<sup>11</sup>

Schaeffer could be right in the aetiology of the historical identification between art and aesthetics, and in some of its negative consequences, but maybe not in his conception of art. This is the view of Peter Osborne, who brands Schaeffer 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.<sup>12</sup> Conceptual Art –Osborne claims– would have made this clear. Osborne is someone who vindicates the philosophy of art of Jena Romanticism

losophy to judge the validity and legitimacy of aesthetic behaviours and artistic acts. 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 we should say a final «good-bye» to this way of understanding aesthetics. J.-M. Schaeffer, 2005, pp. 14-19.

10 The point is 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.

11 Jacques Aumont adds 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». J. Aumont, 2001, pp. 130-131, my translation into English.

12 P. Osborne, 2004, pp. 653-654.

and so «the speculative tradition», or –as Osborne himself puts it– the tradition of «art as ontology», which sees «art as... the site of an autonomous production of meaning and a distinctive modality of truth».<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Osborne cannot think about the philosophical «de-sacralization» of art proposed by Schaeffer but as a «metaphysical disinvestment».<sup>14</sup> 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. 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».<sup>15</sup>

Both, formalist modernism and conceptualism would be then the representatives of the two main philosophical discourses about art that raised two different traditions in art criticism, which would have developed historically parallel and in competition: art as «aesthetic» and art as «ontology».<sup>16</sup> Osborne stresses that the first one followed the Kantian model of disinterested aesthetic judgement. In Kant's thought, 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 and world-disclosive dimensions of works of art. So, rested upon Kant's conception of «aesthetic art» the nineteenth- and twentieth-century tradition of 'art as aesthetic' would have sealed and legitimated the exclusion of art's other aspects perpetuated by the very term «aesthetics». 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<sup>17</sup>.

13 *Ibid.* p. 665.

14 *Ibid.* p. 654.

15 *Ibid.* p. 664.

16 The first tradition runs from Kant through nineteenth-century aestheticism (Baudelaire, Pater, Wilde), through Fry and Bell, to Greenberg. And the second one 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.*, p. 662.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 660. For Osborne, «Kant's work ... has no account of (nor interest in) the ontological distinctiveness of the work of art». Costello has contested a similar view arguing that the general antipathy that Kant's aesthetics still provokes in many artists and theorists come from the distortion that Greenberg's formalist modernism entails. He examines whether the aesthetics of

### III. THE POST-CONCEPTUAL DOGMA

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». <sup>18</sup> In other words, even being ineliminable, the aesthetic dimension of the artwork would still be radically 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», <sup>19</sup> 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.

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 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 the global neo- or 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». <sup>20</sup>

In Osborne’s view, the final lesson of Conceptual Art would have been the demonstration of the necessary conceptuality of any artwork. The also necessary sensuousness of its presentation might make art part of an aesthetic relation in Schaeffer’s terms but, from their contrary conceptions of art, while Schaeffer argues that the «aestheticity» is neither primordial nor exhaustive

Conceptual art could be approached from Kant’s account of the «aesthetic ideas» that, as stated in the *Third Critique*, artworks express. D. Costello, 2007, pp. 92-115.

<sup>18</sup> P. Osborne, 2004, p. 664.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 653, my emphasis.

of the properties or function of the artwork, Osborne 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 we can assign to the aesthetic a deeper role in the meaning of artworks and in the meaning of art itself. This is a possibility that can be explored looking at some of Arthur Danto's latest publications.

#### IV. AESTHETIC PLURALISM AT «THE END OF ART»

Contrary to Schaeffer, and closer to Osborne, Danto affirms the essential conceptuality of the artwork and have contested the tradition of artistic aestheticism. However, since *The abuse...*, Danto has reconsidered the relation between aesthetics (and beauty, as a privileged instance of the aesthetic) and the art of our time on the basis of the distinction between, on one hand, beauty and the aesthetic and, on the other hand, natural and artistic beauty.

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 what Danto calls the «intractable» avant-garde, paradigmatically represented by Dada, who made the abuse of beauty became a device for dissociating the artists from the society they held in contempt, turning «beautifiers» into «collaborationists». As beauty became politicized, later avant-garde took on the role of social criticism begun by Dada and assumed the moral and political responsibility of producing an «anti-aesthetic» art. Again, in this process, Danto notices that the impact of Greenberg's modernist aesthetics was inestimable. Dada and Surrealism were written out of modernist history art as bad art. For Greenberg, the task of the artist was the production of pure beauty for contemplative delectation and anti-aesthetic post-modernism took a sort of stand against aesthetic values similar to that taken by the intractable avant-garde in the history of modern art. The political critique of bourgeois society was made under the guise of a critique of the aesthetic values with which those who mounted that critique associated bourgeois society.<sup>21</sup>

However, for Danto, the rejection of taste and aesthetic quality didn't delete aesthetics in art nor render it irrelevant. The «kalliphobia» that belonged to the defining syndrome of the intractable avant-garde extended all over contemporary art and so did all those gestures that have substituted beauty and sensory gratification with ugliness, obscenity, outrageousness or disgust. Most of the aesthetic qualities of the art of our time are almost the opposite of the aesthetic

21 A.C. Danto, 2004, pp. 26-27.

excellence that Greenberg took for granted. This will be the case, for instance, of the aesthetic of disorder, the aesthetic of grunge and mess exemplified by Rauschenberg's *Bed*, or the aesthetic of the ordinary of *ready-mades* that Marcel Duchamp had in mind by the «anaesthetic».<sup>22</sup> But purging the concept of art of beauty is not the same as purging the concept of art of aesthetic qualities. The art of the 60s and 70s made the kind of aesthetic quality presupposed by the Kant-Greenberg conception practically disappear, but made room for the pluralism of aesthetic modalities, although –according to Danto– this has been perhaps less evident. The artistic revolution urged a solution to the question of the definition of art, and aesthetics took a back seat to the philosophy of art, including Danto's.<sup>23</sup> But the post-modern era that Danto has called «The End of Art», namely, the era of radical openness in which everything is possible as art, is also the era when pluralism extends to aesthetics itself. «If everything is possible as art, everything is possible as aesthetics as well».<sup>24</sup> In conclusion, Danto sees now that art's aesthetic possibilities are so many that it was distorting to think of them as being only one. The radical openness of the art of our time exhibits also a great variety of aesthetic modalities that show that aesthetics has survived into the era of artistic pluralism and anti-aesthetic postmodernism or –in Osborne's terms– post-conceptualism.

The fact is that even those most politically committed artists would have never disregarded the importance of the aesthetic dimension of the artworks, not only historically but also in the most recent art. As Harrison and Wood say about the «committed» art of the 70s: «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».<sup>25</sup> And Osborne acknowledges, for example, that the strategic use of the aesthetic material accounts for «the privileged status of the photographic practice within contemporary art».<sup>26</sup> In his view though, 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

22 A.C. Danto, 2007, p. 126, 2004, p. 29.

23 Danto acknowledges that while Greenberg dominated critical discourse in America, the work of J.L Austin and F. Sibley made very interesting discoveries about aesthetic pluralism when paying attention to predicates other than beautiful, ugly or sublime, such as «dainty», «dumpy», or «grungy»; investigations that were at to a large extent ignored for the advanced theory of art at the time. A. C. Danto, 2007, pp. 125-127.

24 A.C. Danto, 2004, p. 27. See also A.C. Danto, 1995.

25 C. Harrison and P. Wood, 1993, p. 239.

26 P. Osborne, 2004, p. 664.

the artwork to its (otherwise essential) meaning.<sup>27</sup> To sum up, «art against aesthetics (or, Romanticism contra Kant)».<sup>28</sup> Osborne understands the aesthetic then as the purely sensuous, non-cognitive response to visual stimuli sustained by the tradition of «art as aesthetic» that led to formalist modernism. Danto's account helps to change this view.

#### V. AESTHETICS AND ARTISTIC MEANING

To contrast with «semantical» properties, Danto calls aesthetic properties «pragmatic» and are those «intended to dispose an audience to have feelings of one sort or another toward what the artwork represents».<sup>29</sup> In *The Transfiguration...*, Danto already argued that works of art, besides being about something, expressed an attitude or a point of view towards what they are about that the artist would like to transmit to the viewers. This actually will differentiate artworks from «mere representations».<sup>30</sup> Beauty can inspire love, sublime awe, disgust revulsion, ludicrousness contempt, lubricity erotic feelings, and so on –Danto reminds us–; it is what in earlier times was called «rhetoric».

Certainly, this can make art dangerous. Going back to Plato, Danto explained that art can be dangerous «because its methods are open to the representation of dangerous things» and «because the power of art is the power of rhetoric».<sup>31</sup> Rhetoric – he said– aimed at the modification of attitude and belief, and that can never be innocent, and it's real, because minds are so. Nevertheless, the danger of aesthetic qualities doesn't detract from their role in what Danto concludes is art's transformative power, namely, the «effect that art has on those who encounter it».<sup>32</sup> The different aesthetic modes connect feelings with the thoughts that animate works of art, helping to explain why art is important in human life. Therefore, art can be dangerous because the rhetorical power of its aesthetic qualities makes it effective and demands from the viewer a very close and critical look in order to identify which properties of the *object* belong

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*, p. 656.

29 A.C. Danto, 2003, p. xv.

30 A.C. Danto, 1981, chs. 6 and 7. «Danto points out that there many everyday artefacts (such as maps or diagrams) that are also about something... without that sufficing to make them art. Danto calls this sub-class of 'mere real things' 'mere representations' and asks, 'What must we add to the concept of representationality which will make the difference between ordinary representations and works of art? ...Danto argues that expressing some attitude, or point of view, towards what they are about provides what is necessary to distinguish mere representations, which are *only* about what they represent, but do not project any point of view towards it, from works of art, which do». D. Costello, 2008, p. 252.

31 A.C. Danto, 1992, pp. 192, 194. See also A.C. Danto, 1986.

32 A.C. Danto, 2003, p. 131.

to the *work* and how they relate to its meaning.<sup>33</sup> Danto is now approaching the relationship between art and the aesthetic from the perspective of the role that art plays in most of our lives, where its true efficacy lies, but at the same time he would be also focusing on the relevance that the aesthetic can have for artistic interpretation and criticism.

Danto sees aesthetic or pragmatic properties as «inflectors», because they are intended to «inflect» or –with Frege– to «color» (*Farbung*) the meaning of a work of art. An inflector is therefore something produced with the intention of causing some sort of effect or experience in the interpreter. 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, seeing aesthetic qualities as inflectors goes against the usual identification of the aesthetic exclusively with beauty and pleasure. This definition certainly would emphasize the affective component of the aesthetic,<sup>34</sup> but Danto contests an emotivist theory according to which aesthetic terms are used merely to express feelings of pleasure or displeasure. While for Greenberg there was little to say, in front of a piece of good art, beyond an admiring «Wow!», for Danto, saying that something is beautiful is not equivalent to emitting a whistle of approval in its presence. Moreover, as a confessed Hegelian and against Kant, Danto has also argued for the necessary differentiation between natural and artistic beauty. The latter, being an intellectual product, «born of the Spirit», does more than gratify the senses. While in the modernist view what is important aesthetically about a work of art is how its formal qualities strike the eye, for Danto it would be also important to notice how they engage the mind. Employing the Fregean notion of «color» though, Danto assumes that understanding an artwork involves capturing the attitudes toward the subject that the artist tries to provoke in the viewer but also that these attitudes are however still independent of the artwork's meaning. 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».<sup>35</sup> However –as Gilmore's argument continues– when we deal with artworks it wouldn't be so easy to separate one

33 Danto's ontology of art differentiates the material object and the meaning of the work. The object has an indeterminate number of physical features, only a subset of which belongs to the work. Which do and which do not is a matter of interpretation, showing the essential role that interpretation plays in the constitution of an artwork, because «interpretation is part of what holds meaning and object together as a work.» In the same way, «the descriptive art criticism of a work is integral to its identity as a work of art». A.C. Danto, 2005, p. 194.

34 «There is something distinctive of aesthetic concepts [...], namely, how the objects that fall under them affect us when we perceive them.» A.C. Danto, 2004, p. 32.

35 J. Gilmore, 2005, p. 150.

thing from the other. It is not clear how much knowledge is already built into those emotional or attitudinal responses that inflectors invoke. For the inflectors to work, 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. 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 ready-mades operate in a particularly cognitive way that demands very special knowledge of the subject in which they are employed.<sup>36</sup> The degree of coordination between the artist and the viewers required for the inflectors coming into play shows then that their own recognition as well as our response to them may then only be learned. Calling «aesthetic» those features and effects that depend on a certain stock of beliefs or a context would help to broaden the narrow limits of the formalist view of the aesthetic as purely perceptual. What is more, the meaning won't be intelligible without the expected effect on the viewer and so the aesthetic mode in which the artwork is presented should contribute to its conceptual dimension.

Actually, this would be the case of the examples of artworks with which Danto even vindicates the *option* of beauty in the art of today. Motherwell's *Elegies for the Spanish Republic* or Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans' Memorial* help Danto to illustrate how artistic beauty plays a role in art's meaning. They are cases of *internal* beauty. Motherwell's *Elegies* are «visual meditations on the death of a form of life», or of a political ideal, that many hoped would have been beautiful had it survived and prevailed. Whereas the beauty of Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans' Memorial* is internal to the healing process the *Memorial* was designed to achieve in American life. Whatever the explanation of the felt beauty, «it is understood with reference to the 'thought'». <sup>37</sup> The beauty of these works is not something incidental or external to them, but, rather, internal or constitutive. «To interpret these works is in part to offer a reason for why that beauty was what their meaning required». <sup>38</sup>

These are also examples of socially or politically committed art, where the belief that in some way beauty trivializes that that possesses it stigmatized beauty as if it were a sort of incompatibility between the aesthetic dimension of a work and treating seriously certain socio-economical issues. That stigma extended in contemporary art to the aesthetic in general, narrowly identified with beauty and sensory gratification. The old dogma that commanded that *art had to be beautiful* was substituted by that prescribing that *it didn't have to be aesthetic*. Nevertheless, Danto is, of course, aware that beauty can be used

36 *Ibid.* pp. 150-151.

37 A.C. Danto, 2003, pp. 100-101.

38 As J. Gilmore (2005, p. 147) comments.

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».<sup>39</sup> With the notion of internal beauty Danto tries to show then that beauty can be part of the experience of art as an experience richer by far than the «retinal shudder» impugned by Duchamp. But the distinction between internal and external beauty also opens, I think, a critical dimension that is important to take into account when interpreting and evaluating a work of art, and that will be missed if we consider that the aesthetic is irrelevant to those goals.

An artwork is for Danto an «embodied meaning», and the term refers both to the meaning of a certain artwork and to the way in which that particular embodiment is carried out. Actually, as Gilmore also has pointed out, the distinction internal/external beauty can be described saying that external beauty is the sensuous beauty that is paradigmatically discovered in nature and internal beauty, by contrast, is the beauty that belongs exclusively to the domain of art, wherein the beauty is bound up with a work's content<sup>40</sup>. Both kinds of beauty differ in their functions, natural beauty is meaningless and only internal beauty is intended to play a role in conveying a work's meaning. According to Danto, this will be also what Hegel intuited when he declared, at the beginning of his lectures on aesthetics, why artistic beauty is «superior» to natural beauty. For a long time, beauty has occupied a privileged position in art, but there are more aesthetic qualities, and so, even «the ready-mades are not simply industrially produced found objects, but objects so inflected as to cause an attitude of aesthetic indifference».<sup>41</sup> There really is no reason, internal to the concept of art, for artists to confine themselves to beauty or such other of the aesthetic qualities that evoke visual pleasure, and any aesthetic quality is internal if it is part of the meaning of a work.

Recently, the application of the internal/external distinction throughout the vast domain of aesthetic qualities has taken Danto to reconsider Kant's philosophy of art. Particularly, Danto focuses in the Section 49 of the *Third Critique*, «Of the Faculties of the Mind that Constitute Genius», where Kant introduces his concept of aesthetical ideas. «The Kant of Section 49 is not the Kant of Kantian aesthetics, which is based almost entirely on the 'Analytic

39 *Ibid.* p. 113.

40 J. Gilmore, p. 147. See Danto's own words: «In natural beauty, the beauty is external to the thought, in the art the beauty is internal to the work». 2003, p. 101.

41 A.C. Danto, 2003, p.121.

of Taste’». <sup>42</sup> Danto wants to show how close his own views are to Kant’s in this section of his book, which also shows how Kant was registering the deep changes in Enlightenment culture that the age of Romanticism was developing from within. What Kant means by the presentation of aesthetical ideas is very similar to what Danto means by «embodied meanings». As Danto explains, an «aesthetical idea» is really an idea that has been given sensory embodiment, and here Kant uses «aesthetic» in the way it was used by Alexander Baumgarten, where it generally refers to what is given to sense. From this perspective, Danto emphasizes about Kant: «what is stunning is that he has stumbled onto something that is both given to sense *and* intellectual –where we grasp a *meaning* through the senses, rather than merely a color or a taste or a sound». <sup>43</sup>

With no doubt, this last appeal to Kant’s philosophy of art is surprising in Danto, who many times dismissed it and opposed it to Hegel’s. But Danto acknowledges now the «spiritual» nature of Kant’s philosophy of art that distinguishes it from that implied by the «aesthetics of taste» that inspired Greenberg’s aesthetic theory and still nowadays burdens the reception of Kant’s aesthetic thought and the term «aesthetic» itself.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

Since in the middle of the twentieth century the most relevant artistic production rejected modernist aesthetic theory, there has been a question of whether aesthetics had anything really to do with art at all. Recent reviews of the relationship 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. But in the conceptualist mainstream that prevails in the artworld, the aesthetic dimension of artworks seems still nonetheless relegated to an insignificant level that doesn’t affect the conceptual structure of art. However, the art of our time is no aesthetic depending what one means by «aesthetic».

That thesis can be better seen today as the expression of the rejection of formalist modernism and its conception of the aesthetic, which conceived it in purely sensory terms and linked it exclusively to beauty and pleasure. This justified the rejection of modernism by the artistic practices of the 60s and 70s, particularly aimed at producing an intellectual art, with no sensory gratification whatever. Modernism was seen also as the cultural manifestation of certain social and political power and so the program of anti-aesthetic post-modernism

<sup>42</sup> A.C. Danto, 2007, pp. 126-127.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 127.

was erected based on the identification of aesthetics as something politically or morally regressive. Against this standard view of the aesthetic though, a different and richer conception allows also to see differently its relationship with art.

*The abuse...* is for Danto the beginning of his «effort to break away from the Kant-Greenberg aesthetic of form, and instead develop an aesthetics of meaning».<sup>44</sup> Since then Danto has acknowledged aesthetic pluralism in post-modern art and has introduced the concept of internal aesthetic qualities as those that contribute to the meaning of a work of art. This means to concede that the aesthetic can have a significant role to play in interpretation and art criticism and so opens a critical standpoint missed by those who sustain the conceptualist thesis that sees it as critically irrelevant. Like Greenberg, Osborne conceives the aesthetic as empty, blank, and in opposition to meaning, non-cognitive. The account recently given by Danto encompasses though both the affective and the cognitive dimensions of the aesthetic in our engagement with art.

The «aesthetics of meaning» links aesthetics to the essentially cognitive dimension of artworks and –Hegel would say– is a product of its own time, as Danto acknowledges that for aesthetics times are changing.<sup>45</sup> The conceptual gap between art and beauty opened by the intractable avant-garde and perpetuated by its long legacy is irreversible, but there is no reason for opening also a conceptual gap between art and aesthetics. «That beauty belongs neither to the essence nor the definition of art [...] does not mean that *aesthetics* belongs neither to the essence nor the definition of art».<sup>46</sup> However, Danto's «aesthetic turn» is not complete because he still denies that the aesthetic or pragmatic features are a condition for something to be considered an artwork and argues that they are not always internal to its meaning.<sup>47</sup> However, while it is possible for an artist to intend that her work be only incidentally beautiful or possessing any other aesthetic quality, the complete absence of aesthetic qualities in works of art will turn them into «mere representations», and this will mean a problem for Danto's own theory.<sup>48</sup>

44 *Ibid.* p. 126.

45 «If I am right, aesthetics really wandered in the wilderness until the anti-aesthetic bias of contemporary art set it on course once again». *Ibid.* p. 129, n.1.

46 A.C. Danto, 2003, p. 59.

47 D. Costello, 2008. 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. A.C. Danto, 2003, p. xix. Costello contests Danto's view of the *Brillo Box* case using the pragmatic account of aesthetics. D. Costello, 2004, pp. 431-432.

48 This objection is developed in Costello, 2008. See above n. 30.

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 it isn't so not only because at the end of the day Danto admits that «the theory of art as embodied meanings... makes it clear how aesthetic qualities can contribute to the meaning of the work that possesses them» but 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».<sup>49</sup> Being Hegelian, Danto doesn't think, like Hegel, that art has been superseded by philosophy, especially in dealing with the large human issues. 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, which is something that also can be objected to Schaeffer who, when trying to bring to an end «the speculative tradition», overlooks the place of art in human thought (here in its concrete and sensorial form<sup>50</sup>). 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».<sup>51</sup>

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49 A.C. Danto, 2007, p. 128; 2003, p. 59.

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