

Sociological analysis on the discourse of crisis in art

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Abstract

For about a hundred and fifty years, it has been continuously expressed that art has been facing a deadly crisis and this crisis roots itself from the reality that there exists no concrete answer to the question of 'what is art'. However related with the non-existence of consensus on what art is, it's nothing more than a weak understanding to claim that it is impossible to talk about art. Thus, it can be acknowledged that the continuous repetition of the question of 'what is art' and non-existence of consensus on this subject is a clear proof of existence of a sharp struggle in art; and the state of non-consensus and historical continuity of the struggle can be acknowledged as the main source of dynamism of art. For this reason, in this study, it is acknowledged that non-existence of a concrete definition of art is a historical incident; and this controversial state about what art is and calling it the crisis of art itself was made the subject of a sociological analysis. In this analysis, it is concluded that; the actual crisis is not the crisis of art but that of aesthetics'; and that this crisis roots itself from the replacement of aesthetics regime (which dominated art for a very long time) with the non-aesthetic 'artist regime' in the beginning of 20th century and the nonfunctioning of aesthetics by this new regime.

Keywords: art, sociology of art, aesthetics, art regime, artistic change.

1. Introduction

Today, it is often and even outspokenly expressed that art* is facing a deadly crisis and this crisis roots itself from the non-existence of a concrete answer to the question of 'what is art'. Moreover, related with this crisis claimed to be resulting from not having a unique answer to the whatness of the art, some may also propose that sociology of art is almost impossible (Zolberg, 2013).

Indeed, for today, it may be proposed that as the answers to the question of 'what is art' differ from each other and uncompromising, which is seen as something negative, in a case where whatness of art is not certain it is impossible to talk about art. However, such a claim is nothing more than an expression of a weak understanding. Thus, it can be acknowledged that continuous repetition of the question of 'what is art' is a clear proof of the existence of a sharp struggle in the world of art more than a consensus; this state of non-consensus and historical continuity of the struggle on the whatness of art might be acknowledged as the main source of the creative dynamism triggering the production and diversity causing art to create a history.

In this case, instead of evaluating the state of non-existence of a concrete definition of art under the concept of crisis having a negative value, it should be accepted as a historical fact, and the controversial state of the whatness of art and its naming as the crisis of art itself should be made the subject of analysis.

First of all, it should be reminded that discussion on the whatness of the art is not only today's discussion. As is known, although there existed art definitions/concepts transforming into a regime after dominating for certain periods of time, art never had a constant, concrete definition throughout the history and the discussion on the whatness of art continued (though in different densities) for over two thousand years from the antiquity to the present times.† This controversial state about the whatness of art directly reflected itself in the evaluations about what is an artistic work. In this sense, the history of art included many examples such as some products being evaluated as artistic works were later seen as low quality artistic or non-artistic works, or contrarily, honoring of products later, which were either not accepted as artistic works or low quality works in the period they were produced. Naturally, this instability was also seen in the case of who should be evaluated as artist or great artist, and changes took place continuously not only in the places of the artists in the history of art but also in their social situations. Therefore, in the matter of whatness of art, today's difference cannot be more than the overplus of the circulating arguments and the height of these arguments' circulation speed.

2. Art Regimes

Today, in the discussions about art, answers are mostly expected from the aestheticians* and the arguments put forward in the discussions are trying to be supported with the aesthetic theories. In other words, in contemporary discussions about art, aesthetic theories operate as one of the main guides. Because traditionally, in the West and in the countries affected from the West, for a long time, the questions of what the art is, which one is good which one is bad art has been answered by means of the rules and criteria put forward by the logically arranged and philosophically defensible theories produced by the aestheticians. Not only people classified the artists and the artistic works by means of these aesthetic theories, but also the artists created their works under the effect of these theories for a long time (Becker, 2008). Aesthetic systems functioning as one of the valuation tools, with no doubt also passing from other social mediations, not only led an object's adoption to the art market† by getting a label of artistic work and its pricing in this market, but also became an effective element in

* In this study, the term of 'art' is used in the meaning of plastic arts, especially painting.

† As the written texts reaching the current time about the discussions on the whatness of art belong to Ancient Greece such a chronologisation has been made, however, visual evidences on the changes of mentality in Mesopotamia and Egypt art shows that the struggle about the whatness of art is much older than that.

determining the artists' wealth, prestige and power levels, and indirectly their social status. Therefore, changing of the definitions about the whatness of art in the historical process was also sign of change of the artist's position in the system of social stratification system.

In the world of art, except the Middle Ages until the end of 19th century, the dominant artistic concept was an aesthetic theory based on Plato (BC 427-347) and Aristotle (BC 384-322). This aesthetic concept which is generally called the mimetic theory simply assumed that art is an imitation of the external reality, in other words of the nature, and the artist had a task to emulate to the nature/world as it is seen and represent it correctly. However this theory also excluded holistic representation of the external reality and it only approved the representation of the beautiful for art. In other words, it was aimed to emulate the beautiful nature. Thus, in this theory it was the artistic work at the center of the artistic evaluation and the artist was the individual having necessary technical skills to produce a work of art. Therefore, in the mimetic regime which was dominant for a very long time, the artists were seen in the same level with other people producing the objects in the production of which technical skills were needed, and no specific creativity had been attributed to the artists.

However, the Renaissance, which was the heyday of the mimetic regime, was also the period in which artists strongly began to show positive effort to change the perception about them. At the center of these efforts, there was the demand that painters should be seen as creative people who are different from the craftsmen, in the sense that painting is free and not only a technical skill but also something needing mental labor, even something scientific. Related with this, while the imitation of reality was defended as the strongest artistic principle, the idea that artist is a narrator expressing the reality with different materials, in that sense he/she is showing his/her personality in the artwork and for this reason, the artist and his/her artwork are inseparable, has also been raised in this period (Alberti, 1991; Vasari, 2008). These ideas put forward by the artists were also acknowledged by the art customers in the 15th century. Until these years, while the contract included explicit provisions mostly about the properties of the painting, forms of payment and especially about the quality of the materials to be used, in time the provisions of the contract shifted from the quality of the material to the making of the ordered artwork by the artist himself/herself. Therefore, in time, the customers began to demand more in order to ensure that they were not only buying a commodity, but also a unique thing reflecting the subjective creativity of the artist in exchange for their money (Baxandall, 1988).

The idea reached its peak in the 20th century claiming that the subjectivity of the artist reflects itself in the artwork, so the artist and his/her artwork are inseparable. Similarly, although there had been significant increases in the value of the artists and their artworks in the Renaissance (Vasari, 2008), 19th century would come for enormous increases. For instance, paintings of the Renaissance masters would reach higher prices than the works of 18th century carpenters or the Renaissance silversmiths just after 1890's. Until the 19th century, copies of the artworks were seen as important as the original ones and collected by the museums and collectors, it was in the beginning of the 20th century that this was fully abandoned. (Faith, 1985; Dimaggio 1982, 1987).

This change fermented in the Renaissance, became apparent in the second half of the 19th century and turned into an enormous break in the 20th century, it was the decline of the mimetic regime which is the traditional aesthetic approach inherited from the antiquity, and left its place to the non-aesthetic regime which we can call the 'artist regime'. For sure, this significant transformation of art did not happen just because of the inner dynamics of art. The transformation of art had a direct association with a more comprehensive sociological change including economic, political, ideological,

* In this text, the term of 'aestheticians' is used to point out particularly philosophers dealing with art, in general critics, historians, specialists and others approving the aesthetic approach while producing ideas on art.

† The art market, which has a global character at the moment, consists of many agents including mainly artists, galleries, museums, dealers, collectors and audience.

technological transformations that took place in the same historical period, with the emergence of capitalist system and its establishment in the 20th century.

In formal sense, this break starting the era named modern in art meant to give up production of the visible, i.e. the representation of reality, imitation of the nature, production of the beautiful and admired. Modern artists began to distance themselves from the figure which is an expression of model-imitation paradigm, and in a very short process in which modern art movements emerged one after another starting from impressionism continuing to the abstract art, they mobilized a wide range of opportunities to distance themselves from the figurative system and the aesthetic approach centering the beautiful. Predictably, carried out by modern artists, this distancing effort included much more comprehensive submissions than rejection of the traditional in the formal sense. Because, after all, the figurative representation had a function of expressing something, generally the subjects demanded and liked by the traditional sponsors, the Church and nobles, later their successor, the bourgeoisie. Indeed, until the break occurred, the history of Western art was almost a visual parade of the religion and aristocracy. Therefore, the modern artist's distancing from the figure and the beautiful was the rejection of the established sponsorship systems, their instructions and naturally their own subordination; at the same time, it was the expression of the demands of art's being autonomous and the artist's being free in production.

But above all, establishment of the artist regime expressed forming of a field of art having a strong autonomy with its own institutions, rules and agents* allowing this regime change.† As expected, response of the aesthetic approach against this change having a strong sociological dimension was quite late and problematic.‡ Right after the break, it could not be seen that in spite of their different formal characteristics, emerging one after another, modern art movements were basically expressions of the artists' demands that they themselves should be the central evaluation item in art, and the artwork was still thought to be the central evaluation item. According to the aestheticians, the artwork, for instance if this is a painting, was still a 'peinture' and it continued to follow most of the traditional rules of the painting. According to them, what was taking place was that a transition mostly from the concrete world to the formation of the representation of the world of emotions and therefore, the decision about who is still an artist should be given on the basis that what is an artwork.

The response of the artists against this conception had been quite radical§ and in the first half of the 20th century, the artists began to exhibit artworks of quality which were not seen before. The best-known examples of these were presentation of the readymade objects as artworks, realized by Duchamp in the first quarter of the 20th century and later continued by other artists.** This action which allows everything permissible for the artist in the artistic production was not only a radical challenge and opposition to the tradition of plastic arts, but also an action and position about the place of art and the artist in the existing social universe. It was a repetition and stronger expression of the fact that formation of an autonomous art field and rising of the artist to a central position in this field, which found one of its stronger expressions in Courbet's artwork named *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet*, and that the artist being this new situation's defender. Thus, henceforth, who is an artist were not to be defined by the way of what an artwork is, what is an artwork were to be defined by the way of who an artist is. As a result, in the artist regime continued until today, the artist was settled in the center of the definition of art and everything made by the artist, in the production of which the

* In general, the field of art consists of agents such as artists from different movements struggling with each other, educational institutions, galleries, museums, dealers, collectors and audience.

† For the use of field and related concepts in sociology see Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), Bourdieu (1998).

‡ In fact, it's a routine case for the aesthetics to come after the artistic creation. As is known, although the artistic production continued for over thousands of years, the aesthetics itself appeared just in the 18th century as an independent discipline, after its fully adoption of as an intellectual activity.

§ As is known, although the first modern movement Impressionists did not write a manifest, expressing their demands and desires in general with manifests the latter movements aiming a break from the tradition has been transformed into their own theoreticians since 1912.

** Duchamp has been deliberately choosing readymades what he thought not to be perceived as beautiful.

artist got freed from the rules and criteria of the subject, style, technique and material, began to be acknowledged as art. This change also made it necessary to re-evaluate the history of art and regardless of their source, aim and function in the period of their production, those evaluated as artwork in today's field of art began to be acknowledged as such.

3. Conclusion

Naturally, transformation to a new art regime by settling of a non-aesthetic artistic approach to a dominant position created a serious crisis among those seeing art by means of aesthetic theories.* In fact, just like calling the one producing chair, a chair-maker and a skillfully made chair, a good chair, it was an easy way deciding on whether it is an artwork or and whether its producer is an artist or not related with its compliance to the dominant aesthetic artistic approach of its period. However, in the ongoing artist regime, where the product of the artist acknowledged as an artwork, having no limit on the aim, subject, style, technique and material in the productions of the artists, where the term of fine arts left its place to plastic arts, aesthetic criteria became nonfunctional.† The question of 'who the artist is' (Bourdieu, 1993), which became the basic question in the art regime and which is a sociological question in its essence, showed that aestheticians were faced with something unexpected. Similarly, the process not only caused transformation of the plastic arts but also other fields of art to autonomous zones, in some cases it led blurring of the boundaries between them and by this way, as the rules of the game differentiated in every field of art, it became impossible to evaluate all of the different arts such as music, photography, literature, theater, cinema, painting and sculpture with just aesthetic system as it happened in the past. Probably due to the nonfunctioning of aesthetics, it became a fashion to claim the death of art since the 19th century.‡

In another aspect, the actual crisis of aesthetics was not just limited with the art philosophers; it spread to all the people adopting the aesthetic approach. For instance, through aesthetic theories non-explanation of whether an object is an artwork or not, or if it is an artwork whether it is a good artwork or not, caused the art market, which has reached an enormous size, to be open to the manipulations and uncertainty in pricing as it never happened before. For sure, this unforeseeableness not only disturbed the dominant agents of the art market, galleries, museums, dealers, collectors, audience etc., most of all, also made the value of the artists controversial. Thus, there had been a 'share of truth' in the loudly spoken claims of art crisis, but more than just artistic worries or love of art, it rooted itself in the concrete results triggered by the non-explanation of the new art with aesthetics anymore.

Consequently, the crisis of aesthetics did not transform into a structural crisis, briefly into a crisis of art, preventing artistic production as it might be expected. On the contrary, as it was shown by art sustaining its autonomy, the artists sustaining their central position§, and the artistic production reaching an unprecedented size, art maintained its existence. Because, it should be repeated that, as aesthetic approach claims what makes art in its current form is not just the aesthetic value of the

* As a philosopher noticing this transformation, on the other hand insisting on the aesthetic approach, who continued the tradition of producing universal aesthetic definitions of art, Danto's works (1983, 1998, 2014) reveal this clearly.

† For quite a harsh critique on the current situation of the artist regime see Baudrillard (2005).

‡ Another expression of this crisis aestheticians faced in 1930's was that, it was not sociologists but conspicuously those from aesthetic background who had created and sustained art sociology for a long time by using sociological look and knowledge (see Harris, 2001). Thus, contrary to the allegations, absence of a consensus on the concept of art did not hinder sociological studies on art, on the contrary, it served as an opportunity to pave the way for sociological and other non-traditional efforts of analysis on art.

§ For sure, what is mentioned with the expression that the field of art being autonomous, the artist being central in this field, does not mean that the artists are independent of all effects. On the contrary, from the moment we use the concept of 'field of art', sociologically, we express that all the elements in the field affecting each other create a network, and the field itself has a similar relationship with the other fields of the social universe, for instance political and economic fields.

artwork, the ingenuity of its creator and his/her aesthetic worries, it was the field of art itself, which had a historical development with all of social correlations, especially since the Renaissance.

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