

# kosuth and wittgenstein` vs reinhardt and plato

*'The one thing to say about art is that it is one thing. Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else. Art as art is nothing but art. Art is not what is not art.'* – Ad Reinhardt

*'Formalist art is only art by virtue of its resemblance to earlier works of art.'* – Joseph Kosuth

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With the arrival of the unassisted ready-made, art changed its focus from the *form* of the language to the *content* of the utterance. In other words, it changed the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function. This change – one from 'appearance' to 'conception' – was the dawn of the contemporary and the beginning of conceptual art. The idea is: all art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.

Art is art. The claim, made by *both* Kosuth and Reinhardt is that the statement 'Art is...' cannot meaningfully be followed by anything but 'art'.

Kosuth's assumption is that the post-Duchamp shift moved art from out of its aesthetic cloak and into its naked conceptual functionality – a primary function that art has always possessed, albeit obscured by superfluous aesthetic concerns. On the contrary, for Reinhardt the aesthetic is integral and cannot be separated from the 'conceptual' as an extraneous bit of content. How can we account for these different views? Well, Kosuth points to real developments in art, and instances of how the word 'art' is used out there in the world – i.e. we refer to Duchamp's ready-mades as 'art' and we use the term to refer to conceptual pieces, so it's a matter of fact that these things qualify as artworks. This convinces Kosuth that art needn't be aesthetic, and this is where Kosuth initially allies himself with Wittgenstein. Compare Wittgenstein on language:

Meaning is use

Don't say: "There must be something common [...]" – but look and see whether there is anything common to all.  
For if you look [...] you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!

The implication is – don't imagine what artworks might be and build a definition to constrain possible examples, instead, look at what artworks *are* and understand the broad commonalities that way.

For Reinhardt, the concept 'art' is analogous to an analytic proposition, and tautological.

On this understanding, we don't need to look out into the world and see what examples of art tell us – we know what art is (just as we know what 'multiplication' is) and some things can – absolutely – fail to qualify as

artworks.

Reinhardt agrees with Kosuth that art is, indeed, a statement – or proposition – but it is a statement that is essentially aesthetic; it is an aesthetic statement that is given meaning by an assumed, absolute and universal framework of aesthetic dogma, akin to the dogmatic moral framework that supports ethical decisions or statements.

In creating a painting, then, like Bridget Riley explicitly declares, one is making a series of aesthetic decisions; for Reinhardt, a good artist will make aesthetic decisions that are 'pure' (as opposed to corrupt) and *right*. The critic will object: what constitutes a correct aesthetic decision? By what criteria does one judge? This does not trouble Reinhardt since he declares that art is defined negatively; the basis of aesthetic judgements, like works of art themselves, cannot be explained in linguistic terms. The painting is the statement, it cannot be translated. Similarly, the aesthetic judgement is made with reference to an inarticulable standard that is wholly and purely aesthetic (and expressly *not* linguistic or conceptual).

This may seem like a fatal flaw in Reinhardt's logic, or perhaps a very weak argument at least, but it is far from clear that this is the case. It is a problem as old as Plato, the failure to find definitions for terms or the inability to explain concepts in a full and satisfying fashion. Wittgenstein took this to be evidence of the non-existence of definitions, essences or 'concepts' in the traditional sense. But Plato, and plenty of contemporary figures in philosophy, linguistics and cognitive science, suggest that we cannot do away with definitions or concepts. Our inability to *explain* and define concepts might not point to their inexistence (or even to their fuzzy, open nature), but to their *simplicity* or atomic structure. They cannot be explained further because they don't consist of any parts. This tallies entirely with Reinhardt's understanding of 'art as art' – we can't say 'art is x' and enumerate the missing variable, because there isn't anything more fundamental to couch our definition in.

This unassailable rift in art theory (conceptual v aesthetic) is paralleled by an unassailable rift in the philosophy of meaning (semantic essentialism v 'meaning as use'). Unfortunately, philosophers have wrestled with these issues for thousands of years and failed to come up with any definite answers, so don't expect one here. However, next time someone declares that aesthetics are essential to artworks or, on the contrary, that artworks don't need any aesthetic content, challenge their certainty with a nod to centuries of unresolved philosophical debate.

I tend towards a kind of third way, as it happens – something I think is well articulated by Alain Badiou in his theories of truth and infinity. But that's a topic for another time.