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Art in and out of context

Such notions as “language,” “aesthetics,” “arts” or “power” are used both in scholarly discourse and in everyday conversation. It is not only contemporary epistemology but also intuition that make us realize that the truth contained in these concepts may vary with social situations. What is true in one context, for some people, may not be true in another, thus all the above-mentioned terms may differ contextually.

It appears that when the concept seems to evade us we tend to resort to context, which is a fundamental part of our understanding of human conduct, in general and of other texts, in particular. This notion is used whenever we want to indicate that some phenomenon, event, action or discourse needs to be seen or studied in relationship to its environment, that is, its “surrounding” conditions and consequences. We thus not only describe but also explain the occurrence or properties of some focal phenomenon in terms of some aspects of its context. Indeed, as Van Dijk said, contexts are called that way, because etymologically they come with various “texts”¹.

Although contexts are unique, subjective constructs, embodied experiences of various communicative situations, they obviously have a social basis made of knowledge, attitudes, ideologies, grammar and values. This means that contexts also contain an important intersubjective dimension that allows social interaction and communication.

Given the omnipresence of the notion it was inevitable that context has become the object of more focused research. Its analyses are far-fetched and encompass the whole spectrum of science. Indeed, we might say that context is not just a concept studied in many disciplines, in each of which it has a slightly different meaning and different implications. Rather, we may speak of contextualism, a perspective or

¹ Van Dijk T., *Discourse and Context: A Sociocognitive Approach*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 4.

even a kind of theory existing for each discipline that is contrasted with context-free, abstract, structuralist, formalist, autonomous, isolated ways of studying phenomena. Thus, contextualism in many disciplines implies that phenomena must always be described and understood in relation to a situation or environment².

The 1960s and 1980s mark the beginning of a more focused reflection on this problem in the humanities and social sciences, namely an expansion from a formal study of works of art, sentences, communicative events, to more socially or contextually seated approaches. Since the 1990s, in most contemporary art, aesthetics, social psychology or discourse studies, “context” and “contextualization” have become key concepts, and some other disciplines, such as philosophy, history and the natural sciences have been influenced by various forms of contextualism. Given these developments, it comes as a surprise that although there are articles and books that feature the notion of context, still very few of them study context *per se*. It is Van Dijk’s book *Discourse and Context* that is to offer a more comprehensive, integrated and multidisciplinary theory.

The aims of this article are very humble in comparison with Van Dijk’s attempts since it serves only as a means to highlighting some moments in the development of aesthetics and arts that contributed to the rejection of old paradigms and instigated a move towards a more context-focused analyses. The article underscores the inevitability of context-focused approaches championed in contemporary aesthetics and arts and primarily aims to demonstrate that the value of works of art increases when contextual factors are taken into consideration.

Despite this above-mentioned paucity of all-embracing, comprehensive research on context and contextualization, it seems that the discipline of the arts and aesthetics brought to the fore this problem quite early. On numerous occasions it has been highlighted that art serves as a harbinger of dilemmas that are to be later undertaken by some other disciplines. In aesthetic theory the conflict between isolationist and conceptualist approaches to arts used to be the great divide. Almost all philosophies of art can be classified as contextualist or isolationist, or mediating between these two broadly applied terms. An isolationist aesthetics posits that art is distinct and separate from the rest of life whereas contextualist aesthetics posits integrity of art and life. It can be assumed that this conflict has been perennial but its arbitrators resorted to different nomenclature. In the old guise it used to be couched in terms of “form and content debate”, whereas nowadays its scope has been broadened and is couched in terms of “form and context” debate³.

² Ibidem, p. 4.

³ Dziemidok B., *Artistic Formalism. Its Achievements and Weaknesses*, “The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, 1993, Vol. 51, No. 2.

Disinterest theory and formalist theory

The theories that established the tradition of analyzing works of art purposefully detached from their context laid the foundations for a certain type of aesthetics. This kind of aesthetics delimited our encounters and modes of perceiving and understanding art. Although not devoid of some merits, disinterest theories seem to be defunct at the time when aesthetics and arts are no longer perceived as insulated elements of philosophical enquiry but have encroached into the sphere of culture.

Disinterest theories are inextricably linked with the term decontextualism, which foregrounds contemplation of exclusively formal features of aesthetic objects. According to decontextualist beliefs, aesthetic attention achieves its purest form when it is cleansed of all nonesthetic aspects. And hence disinterest serves as a springboard to achieving objectivity. Disinterest as the basis for aesthetic judgement appeared in Britain in the late 17th century and was codified and elaborated by the British Taste Theorists. Lord Shaftsbury is credited with being the first to utilize this notion, which was to mean “not motivated by self-concern”. Francis Hutcheson, Joseph Addison based their theory of taste not on Platonic entities but on empiricism that at that time became deeply entrenched in Britain. Also David Hume and Edmund Burke contributed to the development of the notion.

Yet it was in Germany, in the later part of the 18th and early 19th centuries, where disinterest assumed its most sophisticated form. It was Kant who is credited with the most elaborated notion of this concept. According to him, human beings have the same faculties for understanding the phenomenal world and this understanding coupled with disinterest are all the elements necessary to produce a true and universal aesthetic judgement. Like for his British forerunners, the object is not to be considered instrumentally, what is more, for Kant, it is to be considered under no categories. For the aestheticians of the 18th and 19th centuries to view disinterestedly is to view without any regard for context. Since the value of an art object rested intrinsically on its internal, formal properties, its function did not play any role⁴.

Within a century, the work of Kant came to influence generations of artists who rejected all functionality that might be associated with works of art or art itself. With *the Critique of Judgement* the nature of the exercise of taste became intimately connected not merely to the *a priori* conditions – to disinterest, but also intimately connected with the very notion of beauty itself. For the object to be beautiful, the delight we take in it must be insular and isolated. Extrinsic or instrumental accounts were rejected since they placed value in the production of some psychological, cognitive or affective state, namely the context of art production.

At the onset of the disinterest theory with Shaftesbury and Hutcheson it had primarily a negative sense. If we could eliminate from our concerns anything personal than our judgements were proper. Later theorists, including Kant, incorporated a pos-

⁴ Fenner D., *Art in Context. Understanding Aesthetic Value*, Ohio University Press, 2008, pp. 81-95.

itive element: we should consider the object for its own sake, on its own terms. What all these theories recommend is a removal of an object of aesthetic consideration from any contemplative context that might be tainted by circumstance, personal aspects, function, purpose or instrumentality. Moreover, all considerations of how the object could provide a benefit to the agent except its role as an aesthetic object should be removed. The object is set in a position of being out of relation with any other object and the agent is interested in the object solely as a focus of attention.

The disinterest theory suspended all consideration of how the object could serve some functional and instrumental purpose beyond being an aesthetic object. Yet, contemporary art and aesthetics in their practice and theory often underscore, for example, the importance of ethics and many contemporary art projects have been prompted, guided and conditioned by ethical considerations. Moreover, disinterest theories, where the object is out of relation with any other state or property, thwart any attempts of classification of objects as works of art, thereby, rendering, for example, Danto's theory impossible. Finally, the theory of disinterest, posits that the recipient of art becomes an "everyperson", devoid of individual experience, psychology and memories through which they filter the experience of art. This postulate seriously undermines encounters with contemporary art since the inclusion of certain contextual aspects in our judgment of works of art proved both inescapable and enriching.

Art museum

What is historically interesting about the disinterest theories is that they were being formed around the same time as art museums were being founded. What all these theories recommend is a removal of an object of aesthetic consideration from any contemplative context that may be guided by instrumentality. In large measure, art museum provides the physical location for encouraging exactly what disinterest theorists recommend⁵. The very existence of an institution devoted to collecting, preserving, exhibiting, researching and interpreting works of art gives credence to the concept of "setting aside" an object for aesthetic contemplation and separating it from the everyday world⁶. As Fenner observes decontextualization of art exhibiting spaces automatically inclines art theorists to think in a more decontextualized ways. Art museum designers wish to provide uncontextualized space or a space where context is all about pointing to the artworks which are insulated from the cares of the world. This contributes to aestheticism, which is a view about the nature of art and artistic value, but it is also a theory about how artistic value relates to other values. From an art for art's sake perspective, the only values that need to be accounted for by art are strictly artistic or aesthetic. This automatically releases artists from concern about the moral and social implications of their works.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 10.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 6.

This decontextualisation of art exhibiting places was critically undermined in the late 1960s by Institutional Critique which started to question the purported neutrality of art spaces. At that time art institutions were often perceived as places of “cultural confinement”, whose disinterested attitude as well as aesthetic, political and theoretical neutrality was to be questioned. Institutional critique contributed to the creation of site-specific art with its focus of the contextual properties of art works. Since the early 1990s, institutional critique, whilst questioning the original concept of “setting aside” an object for aesthetic contemplation and separating it from the everyday world, has started to perceive museums and galleries as sites of social interaction and spontaneous creation of contingent, temporal works of art created under the rubric of Bourriard’s relational aesthetics. Although contemporary aesthetic theories and art seemed right while titling harsh criticism at the concept of disinterest, there are some critics who still defend some of its premises. For instance, George Levine states that there are conditions that make this category problematic but not problematic enough to dispel its necessity. According to him, if the beautiful is always deconstructed, demystified, taken as ideologically suspect, it happens that a fundamental element of human experience is rejected. Thus the implication that everything must be understood to confirm the dominant ideologies of the world’s historical context, in a broader perspective, contradicts the view that artists are capable of transcending the limits of their own time⁷.

Formalism

Disinterest theories and formalism demonstrate a lot of affinities and correlations. Yet it is worthwhile underscoring that disinterest is a subject focused theory whereas formalism is an object based theory. In aesthetics and art criticism the term “formalism” is used in many different contexts. It may mean a methodological orientation, a specific conception of an artwork or a position on its valuation. Despite the fact that they are all interrelated, the axiological question comes to the fore. Historically, formalism may be divided into three main strands. It originated in ancient Greece with Aristotle, developed in medieval Europe with Aquinas and became codified in the 17th and 18th centuries with the British Taste Theorists.

Despite various historical frameworks and ramifications, formalism posits that the correct assessment and appreciation of an aesthetic object or a work of art, in terms of considering its value and meaning, is attained only when the agent restricts attention to the formal properties of the object; properties that are accessible through the senses, properties that are objective in the sense of having their locus in the object. Formalism was the leading principle behind aestheticism and the art-for art’s sake movement where the sole function of art rested on pure, relationless contemplation.

⁷ Levine G., *Saving Disinterest, Aesthetics, Contingency, and Mixed Conditions*, “New Literary History” 2001, Vol. 32, No. 4.

More contemporaneously, distinguished formalist included: Clive Bell, propounding theory of Significant Form, Eduard Hanslick, Roger Fry and Clement Greenberg. The later is considered the foremost formalist critic of the mid-twentieth century. He was convinced that any analysis that searched for a deeper meaning of context in abstract art went against the grain of formal art theory. Greenberg was a formalist because he analyzed art solely on the basis of elemental truths of an artwork, on the basis of the visual impact it had on the viewer.

Greenberg concluded that abstraction was the purest form of art because the abstract image was self-explanatory; it existed on its own merits and contained no hidden meaning. A painting's form is composed of its basic elements: color, line, composition, and texture. These elements constitute the fundamental language used by formalist art critics to examine and analyze works of art. The artistic form was judged in terms of the internal characteristics and excluded external references.

At its extreme, formalism in art history posits that everything necessary to comprehending a work of art is contained within its form. The context for the work, including the reason for its creation, the historical background, and the life of the artist, that is, its conceptual aspect, all these are considered of secondary importance. The formalists thought beauty could matter only if it was given its own niche. Yet beauty that must be pure and must always remain confined to its own niche may stop mattering⁸.

Also Bohdan Dziemidok seems right stating that formalism is untenable as a universal theory of art and artistic values. Yet he notices that artistic formalism contributed to the development of the arts in general since it deepened our understanding of the uniqueness of individual art forms. Also formalism defended art's autonomy and contributed to the development and sophistication of anti-formalist conceptions of art and art values such as cognitivist, representationalist and culturalist approaches, which are at the heart of contextual understanding of art⁹.

Contemporary art in contexts

The literature of Western aesthetics from the past two millennia amply demonstrates that works of art are more valuable when they are considered within appropriate contexts. This article is not to summarize all the literature; which would be a daunting task, but rather to demonstrate a codification of an important controversy in aesthetic theory and arts, it is not to give a detailed account of the ideas, but to show how they underline the conflict. Only a few most prominent examples that represent challenges to the disinterest theory, formalism, decontextualism will be mentioned so as to demonstrate how enhancement is achieved thanks to incorporating contextual

⁸ Ibidem, pp. 122-140.

⁹ Dziemidok B., op.cit., p. 198.

factors into art analyses since the value of works of art increases when certain contextual factors are taken into consideration.

Definitions of art

The early part of the last century saw challenges to the very definition of art: Dada, *ready mades*, pop art and conceptual art expanded definitions of art and made room for the inclusion of context into art analyses. Anti-essentialism forged in the twentieth century contended that there is no single essence of art since there are many definitions of art, all equally legitimate. This trend towards antiessentialism began with Wittgenstein and his theory of family resemblance. According to Wittgenstein, there is no single feature shared by all art objects, but various art objects share in common with other art objects certain features, making a family out of art. Although the theory does not specifically address the problem of art, with Wittgenstein came the realization that various definitions of art may operate at the same time. Finally, art is a concept that is open and must evolve, so that while there may be disjunctive definitions of art that we have today, they may converge in future¹⁰.

One of the most contextual definition of art was proposed by Arthur Danto. He believed that it was context that decided whether an object belonged to the realm of art and while we may not be able to identify objective features of works of art that are common to all of them, there is nonetheless something that is common to all artworks, namely their position in the art world. Danto suggests that artworks are principally vehicles for aesthetic interpretation. For an object to be an artwork, it must be seen to be an artwork. What accounts for the difference between art and non-art is a theory of art. The interpretation transfigures an object into art. The interpreter for Danto is not a single subject but a sort of collective subject. The artworld is a living, changing tradition, consisting of artists, critics, patrons, art historians, curators, aestheticians. But the artworld is also the interpretive tradition itself, a historical progression, an institution made up not merely of people and objects but also time and history.

Aesthetic experience

There were many other aestheticians who proposed an alternative, much more contextual ways of understanding aesthetic experience that bridged the gap between the realm of aesthetics and life and led to the necessary redefinition of the domain of aesthetics itself. George Santayana, for instance, accentuated the role of pleasure and psychological context during the formation of an aesthetic experience and presented a strong anti-Kantian position. He discouraged disinterest and encouraged explora-

¹⁰ Dziemidok B., *Główne kontrowersje estetyki współczesnej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa, 2002, pp. 107-128.

tion of aesthetics that acknowledges our vital and deep interest in aesthetic objects. According to Santayana, aesthetic objects are not to be contemplated at arm's length and insulated from our attachments. They should be considered as part of what we indeed mostly cherish and engage into. Like anti-essentialists, he claimed that the notion of the universality of beauty rests on the mistake since it is a subjective, psychological and deeply contextual phenomenon¹¹.

Similarly, John Dewey, like many philosophers and aestheticians of that time, foregrounded the concept of experience. For him it is an interactive relationship between the perceiver and the object that is unified and complete. Dewey shifts the paradigm of the aesthetic experience towards the ordinary, towards the context. According to this American philosopher, any experience is aesthetic to some degree as long as it incorporates unity. The degree of unity will vary and clearly those experiences that are maximally unified are the aesthetic ones. The judgement of whether an experience is an experience is made solely on the basis of the lived experience of an individual perceiver and the aesthetic quality of experience is thus something that is very personal and contextual. Individual experience is what is at the heart of all aesthetic judgments. Dewey is careful not to prescribe which experiences are aesthetic and which are not, he allows for the decision of the common person. Dewey's theory is completely at odds with the postulates of the 18th century disinterest theory¹². Arnold Berleant and his environmental aesthetics applies context as a framework for his aesthetic theory. The greater the sensory engagement and involvement of the subject, the greater the depth of our appreciation, identification and recognition of our interconnectedness with the environment. At the time of ecological crisis, this strong personal, cognitive, emotional, intellectual bond with the environment not only replaces the customary contemplative admiration, but also spurs us to direct action. Context is not an adjunct to Berleant's theory since it rests at its very foundation. He does not seek a gulf between the viewer and the viewed; and instead celebrates an intimacy between the two and the greater the intimacy, the greater the experience¹³.

Art in context

Examining works of arts, at various moments in history, scholars were urged to study them and their structures "in their own right," and forego their context – as it has been underscored this tendency was established in antiquity, codified by Kant and became widespread in modernism with its formalist approach to works of art. Yet this tradition could not do justice to contemporary art since nowadays art is located horizontally in terms of culture rather than vertically in terms of its diachronic engagement with disciplinary forms of medium or genre. Thus nowadays also aesthetics

¹¹ Santayana G., *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outline of Aesthetic Theory*, HardPress Publishing, New York, 1961.

¹² Dewey J., *Art as Experience*, Perigee Books, New York, 1934.

¹³ Berleant A., *Prze-mysleć estetykę*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków, 2007.

is perceived more as the aesthetics of uses and actualization rather than a rigid theoretical system. As of the 90s, non-art contexts have started to be increasingly drawn into art discourse and artists have become autonomous agents of social processes, partisans of the real. The interaction between artists and social situations, between art and non-art contexts has led to a new art form, CONTEXT ART¹⁴, where both have become inextricably folded together. It seems that contemporary artists not only create contexts, they rather work within them. Therefore, social, political, ethical, ecological, moral or gender issues provide contexts under which aesthetic objects are considered. Contexts are brought as categories for dealing with aesthetic objects and experiencing them.

Context in art appears as the web of complex circumstances in which artists work in relation to their physical environment, historical trends and traditions, social movements, cultural values, intellectual perspectives or personal commitments. Likewise, art is received within a context of corresponding dynamics that shape meaning and interpretation. As such, context has become an inescapable dimension of art both during its production, its reception and interpretation. Fenner rightly observes that artworks have some internal logic and also a set of external rules so there is no need to dissolve the distinction between the formalist and contextualist approaches. Yet, to know the externalities without knowing the internalities is fairly useless. We cannot competently understand the internal structure, logic, rules of a work of art without at the same time understanding the external logic to which this particular work's internal logic is related and perhaps even embedded¹⁵.

Therefore it seems right to claim that contextualism is instrumental, if not requisite, in our understanding of both contemporary art and aesthetics theory. The above delineated disinterest theories and formalism that used to provide a conceptual framework for our thinking about these realms has led to the insulation of art and aesthetic from the real world, limited our aesthetic experience and marginalized some forms of art. Certainly, contextualism does not make art subservient to nonaesthetic values since removal of aesthetics from the real world limits our aesthetic experience and fosters elitism and art marginalization. Keeping in mind that contemporary art is located more horizontally in terms of culture rather than vertically in terms of its diachronic engagement with disciplinary forms of medium or genre and aesthetics is perceived more as the aesthetics of uses and actualization rather than a rigid theoretical system, contexts do seem indispensable as categories for dealing and experiencing aesthetic objects.

¹⁴ The term was introduced under the German translation KONTEXT KUNST instead of Context Art and never spread beyond Europe. In literature, much more often the term *participatory art or community art* may be applied. See: *Living as Form. Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*.

¹⁵ Fenner D., op. cit., p. 303.

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Abstract: This article discusses the role of context in arts and aesthetic theory and demonstrates that contextual analysis broadens our understanding of these two realms. It demonstrates a codification of an important controversy in aesthetic theory and arts between formalist and contextualist theories. It serves as a means to highlighting some moments in the development of aesthetics and arts that contributed to the rejection of old paradigms (disinterest theory, formalism) and instigated a move towards a more context-focused analyses of art and aesthetics.

Keywords: context, arts, aesthetics, disinterest, formalism