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Art as human reflective practice

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ABSTRACT

Art is a human practice of reflexivity that can be found in different contexts, and the studies presented demonstrate this. The **first chapter** presents an overview of visual art in monotheistic religions and investigates the links between religious art and psychology. In the **second chapter**, the research investigates the aesthetic and vitality judgments of faces representing dead, Saints and non-Saints. In the results, Saints were judged more beautiful while non-Saints were judged more vital. This suggests a relationship between ethics and aesthetics in the perception of art. The **third chapter** examines the relationship between art, robots, and humans. Does believing that artwork was created by a robot, rather than a human, affect aesthetic evaluation? The research showed that paintings that people believe were made by humans receive high aesthetic appreciation, while paintings that people believed were made by robots receive low artistic competence scores. From these results, art is seen as a purely human skill.

ABSTRACT

L'arte è una pratica umana di riflessività che si può trovare in diversi contesti e gli studi presentati lo dimostrano. Il **primo capitolo** presenta una panoramica dell'arte visiva nelle religioni monoteiste e indaga i legami tra arte religiosa e psicologia. Nel **secondo capitolo**, la ricerca indaga i giudizi estetici e di vitalità di volti che rappresentano morti, Santi e non Santi. I risultati mostrano che i Santi sono stati giudicati più belli, mentre i non Santi sono stati giudicati più vitali. Questo suggerisce una relazione tra etica ed estetica anche nella percezione dell'arte. Il **terzo capitolo** esamina il rapporto tra arte, robot ed esseri umani. Credere che l'opera d'arte sia stata creata da un robot, piuttosto che da un essere umano, influisce sulla valutazione estetica? La ricerca ha dimostrato che i dipinti che le persone credono siano stati realizzati da esseri umani ricevono un alto apprezzamento estetico, mentre i dipinti che le persone credono siano stati realizzati da robot ricevono un basso punteggio di competenza artistica. Da questi risultati, l'arte viene vista come un'abilità puramente umana.

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INTRODUCTION

Art as human reflective practice

While abroad in San Salvador for my study stay, I found myself having lunch with an architecture professor and an art enthusiast. The first question I was asked was "What is art?". Of course, as a doctoral student in the field of art psychology, I had some ideas in mind about art as knowledge area related to aesthetics and beauty theories, but not a clear and simple way to define and explain what art is. After all, there must be a reason why philosophers and especially art critics have been debating this question for centuries.

Given the difficulty in finding a definition, at this point, we tried to narrow it down and try to figure out what can be considered art and what cannot. For example, is "The Night", an Italian film directed by Antonioni in 1961, art? Is a crystal glass resting on a dining table art? Is observing a fisherman walking on the beach art? Reasoning by categories, one would say that these are three different items: a socio-cultural artifact, an object, and an experience. Hence, according to aesthetic scholars, only Antonioni's film belongs to art because it is an artifact without practical functions that elicits an aesthetic experience, that is, a specific cognitive and emotional response and interactions (Mastandrea, 2014; Mastandrea et al., 2021). This definition raises some questions. For example, can an object with both aesthetic and practical functions be considered art? Moreover, is the aesthetic experience caused only by art? Finally, if art elicits an aesthetic experience, are people able to clearly distinguish between an artwork and an ordinary object?

Mastandrea (2014) provides the answer to the first two questions: "For example, Juicy Salif is a lemon juicer created by the designer Philippe Starck. If you have never seen it before, it would be difficult to understand what it is for, to guess its function. The functional meaning is not immediately understandable. Its affordance is quite ambiguous. It is a very innovative object in which the designer has completely formally changed the different components that constitute the traditional lemon juicer.

It looks like a sort of baroque sculpture, with only curved lines, composed by an oval upper part (where you squeeze the lemon) and three long legs that stand on a table. If you do not know the function, you might appreciate it as a sculpture, because it looks like a sculpture. The aesthetic appreciation of this object is an inverse function of its practical utility. The more the practical function is explicit and declared, the lower will be its aesthetic appreciation” (p. 501). Indeed, it seems clear that an object like a citrus squeezer, while having a specific purpose, can be part of the art category and can therefore arouse an aesthetic experience.

Regarding the last question, whether people can certainly distinguish between a work of art and an ordinary object, there are numerous cases of stories of artworks being mistaken for common objects and vice versa. Just to mention a couple, in the first case, an art-loving lady, while at the Picasso Museum in Paris, took home a blue jacket that she found hanging on a wall, not realizing that it was a work of contemporary art by Oriol Vilanova¹; in the second case, a cleaning woman damaged Martin Kippenberger's work "When it Starts Dripping from the Ceiling", removing the patina that made the work look like a rain puddle². These responses seem to indicate that the boundaries of art are much more blurred than those imagined by those who conceive art as a discipline whose objects are well-defined, confirming what the art critic Dino Formaggio (1990) said: "art is everything that men call art".

Hence the proposal to think of art not as a discipline but as a human practice of reflexivity. This idea was suggested a few years ago by the philosopher Bertram, an exponent of the philosophy of contemporary art, in his book “Art as human practice: an aesthetics” (Bertram, 2017). I will now try to explain the meaning of human reflective practice, showing how each term is linked to art.

In the human practice of reflexivity, the “human” term is peculiar (Bloom, 2010): in fact, art, like music, religion, and philosophy, is a uniquely human activity found in no other species. According

¹ <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2022/04/05/scambia-unopera-darte-per-una-giacca-abbandonata-la-porta-a-casa-e-la-accorcia-il-bizarro-furto-al-museo-picasso-di-parigi/6549041/> (last access 12/12/2022).

² <https://attualissimo.it/germania-colf-distratta-distrugge-unopera-darte-da-un-milione-di-dollari/> (last access 15/12/2022).

to Bloom (2010), art could be a "sign of Darwinian fitness" (p. 132) for humans: its evolutionary purpose is to attract partners because the creation of art indicates the possession of good qualities such as intelligence, creativity, and motor control. The "practice" refers to action: as reported by Mastandrea (2014), art does not require a passive response but a real and active interaction. However, this interaction does not result only in an aesthetic experience, but also in an interpretation that inevitably leads to reflection. In this sense, art allows man to give the world a new sense and meaning (Bertram, 2017). Paraphrasing Freud (1907), art is to adults what play is to children: just as play allows children to explore and manipulate the world and develop their psycho-motor skills and their imaginations, so art allows adults to create possible realities and dialogue with them, benefiting a greater understanding of themselves and the world. In this perspective, art returns to being an engine of reflections that give us back new thoughts and consequently a new reality.

All these considerations lead to indicate that art is not a separate domain, but it is a reflective practice that can be found in different fields and contexts. For these reasons the thesis, which focuses on art as a reflective human practice, can be divided into two major strands: religious art and Artificial Intelligence (AI) art. The results of both empirical studies show that art is a uniquely human practice, as well as an engine of thought creation that allows us to delve into the functioning of our behaviour and cognition and the functioning and creation of our society and culture.

The **first chapter** presents an overview of visual art in Western society, particularly in the three major monotheistic religions, and investigates the links between religious art and psychology. Hence, this chapter first provides a brief history of the use of images in the three great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity), all influenced by the commandment prohibiting idolatry (Exodus 20:4). This commandment was interpreted differently by each of these religions and influenced the use of visual art in religious contexts. Only Catholicism developed a strong relationship with the visual arts, but even this bond has changed over time as society has become increasingly secular. The use of visual art in the Catholic context is then investigated, highlighting the distinction between sacred and religious art. Finally, possible investigations that psychology could carry out in the field

of religious art are discussed: in particular, future research should explore the differences between categories of images, for example between secular and religious images, and the possible influences of sociocultural factors on aesthetic judgments.

The **second chapter** aims to implement research on the topics proposed in the first chapter. Starting from a brief history of *kalokagathia* (the relationship between good and beauty), two questions arise: is beauty linked to good even in art? How important are people's religious beliefs in aesthetic and vitality judgments? We tried to answer these questions by studying people's reactions to images of Saints as witnesses of goodness, in comparison with portraits of ordinary people. Moreover, the study of Saints' paintings would allow us to investigate vitality, understood as one's perception of a living being. The research aimed to investigate the aesthetic and vitality judgments of faces representing dead, Saints and non-Saints. Overall, these data suggest Saints were judged more beautiful than non-Saints, and non-Saints were judged more vital than Saints. This might suggest a relationship between ethics and aesthetics also in the perception of art and offers reflections on the theme of vitality, a topic that is still ill-defined and therefore to be explored. Finally, the religion and the spirituality of participants are not correlated to aesthetic or vitality judgments: this fact could support that these judgments are linked to the basic bottom-up reactions to images, that is, a reaction not primarily influenced by sociocultural factors.

The **third chapter** examines the relationship between art, robots, and humans. Does believing that a work of art was created by a robot, rather than a human (and vice versa), affect our aesthetic evaluation of the artwork? Our research shows that aesthetic evaluations, both subjective (aesthetic appreciation) and objective (artistic competence), change depending on whether subjects are led to believe that the author of the paintings is a robot rather than a human, and vice versa. Specifically, paintings that people believe were made by humans receive high aesthetic appreciation, while paintings that people believe were made by robots receive low artistic competence scores. From these results, art is seen as a purely human skill, indeed confirming Bloom's theory (2010) that art is an exclusively human activity.

In conclusion, all these studies show that art is applicable in different contexts, in which precisely the propulsive and pragmatic force of art is emphasized. Art is thus a practice of human reflection that implies not only a search for aesthetic pleasantness but also a search for reflections of meaning.

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