

Objects in mirror are closer than they appear, or Marcel Duchamp's Examples and the Philosophy of Art

Common sense attitude towards the role of examples in aesthetic discussions assumes that they are “mere” illustrations or applications of the general law; example mirrors certain theoretical statement. Whether one discusses Bach or Beethoven is not relevant as long as the provided context is the absolute music. Botticelli's *oeuvre* and David's can be used interchangeably as long as the traditional or figurative painting is discussed, and so on. But when the discussion touches upon the difference between, let's say Botticelli's painting and the one made by Wassily Kandinsky the example no longer functions as “one of many”, but appears as the unique, privileged – paradigmatic. Now, the philosopher's task is to mirror in the theory the particular case. Unluckily, in many instances Friedrich Schlegel's aphorism still can be applied: “What is called Philosophy of Art usually lacks one of two things: either the philosophy, or the art” [*Kritische Fragmente* 1797] .

Aesthetics is what conditions the knowledge of particulars. This statement holds the truth at least for the Kantian tradition: in order to have knowledge one needs a concept, as well as a rule according to which a particular can be subsumed under this concept. However, aesthetic judgments are reflective – not determinate, as logical ones. This means that we begin with particular and we seek to find universal, yet unknown. Kant's thesis formulated in his *Critique of Judgment* says that works of art are “exemplary”, that is: they do not follow any kind of pre-established, general rules but they set a “a standard or rule of estimating”. In other words: artistic practice is governed by its own, non-conceptual rules, although its result – the work of art, can serve as the model for thinking and judging the other works of art.

One may say that the contemporary aesthetics, as the philosophical reflection upon art, definition of art and the nature of aesthetic judgments is build upon the model of the work of art presented in the beginning of the XXth Century by Marcel Duchamp. The notorious Duchamp's *Fountain* from 1917 serves as the constant point of reference for virtually any contemporary aesthetic theory. Duchamp's readymade(s) or even “Duchamp” as the theoretical heuristic figure functions as the Kantian “example”.

Nelson Goodman reminds us that “Exemplification is possession plus reference”. As Stanley Cavell claims there are two possible philosophical uses of examples. “Traditional theory” chooses an example as the “generic object” – that is “bits of wax, tables, chairs, houses, men, envelopes, bells, sheets of paper, tomatoes, blackboards, pencils, etc. [...] paltry, arbitrary examples which stultify investigations from the outset”. In other words, such objects do not challenge us with the question of recognition, identification or description. The properties that they exemplify are usually as simple as “materiality as such”, or “externality”, “thatness”. Usually in the philosophical discussion there is no difference whether one refers to unicorn or rhinoceros. The other possibility is to refer to “specific objects”. According to Cavell they bring “to attention, the problem, one might say, of the phenomenology of materiality”. With respect to this differentiation aesthetic examples, or rather examples in aesthetics are always specific objects and not mere “generic” ones, favored by epistemologists and ontologists. The property or the set of properties the object possesses needs to be properly recognized, identified and described and the symbolic system in which exemplification operates is “dense” (Goodman): we might not know which traits of the exemplifying representation are relevant for the reference to be successful.

The question that I would like to raise is: what is the role played by the examples of Duchamp's art and by the examples provided by the artistic strategies of Duchamp in contemporary philosophy of art? I will discuss theoretical proposals presented by Arthur C. Danto, Rosalind Krauss, Thierry de Duve, Jean-François Lyotard. And more specifically, I will focus on the question whether some forms of aesthetic formalism and aesthetic contextualism can be reconciled.