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Chosen Topic: Art is not a copy of the real world. One of the damn things is enough.

Introduction

Throughout history there have been many different opinions on the meaning and the importance of art. The act of creation has been considered by many philosophers (for instance Friedrich Nietzsche) and artists as the only truly meaningful thing in our lives. One of the most influential attitudes on the meaning of art is the one that is criticized in the above quotation. 'Art is a copy of the real world' is the attitude that is usually thought to refer to the ancient Greek understanding of art (that is the reason why Plato wanted poets to be banished from his ideal state, since they copy the world that is already a copy of the eternal and ideal world of Forms, i.e. their creation is valueless). In this essay I would like to question what the arguments to support this viewpoint could be, and more importantly to oppose it. I would also like to question what further implications of the acceptance, or the denial, of the definition of the objects of art as the mere copies of the 'reality' could be.

Is art the copy of the 'real world'?

Art is the act of creation. Art is the act of achieving the Sublime. Art might be understood as the materialized virtue that ancient Greek people called 'hybris', which means externalizing, doing the things that are beyond one's capabilities. Art, which is by definition an act of creation, could not be possible if we reduced it to the mere act of copying. Yes, it is true that our inspiration may derive from the world. Yes, it is true that we create under certain social, cultural, historical conditions. We are influenced by the temporal and spatial dimensions we reside in, but still, the creation itself would not be possible if we did not have the ability to overcome all of the restraints. A contemporary philosopher called Shelly Kagan said that constraints are invariably immoral. Similarly, I believe that the constraints (of our 'reality') are invariably hindering the act of creation (just remember the works of art that were created in order to be only purposive – the portraits of the totalitarian leaders for instance – do we really intrinsically and wholeheartedly feel that these portraits are the works of art?). The act of creation (of the objects of art) is one of the very rare acts we are capable of which leaves space for the ultimate freedom. As Wittgenstein claimed (and Shelly Kagan would have agreed I believe) ethics and aesthetics coincide in the moment of creation and in the works of art as well.

No, why not?

Art cannot be the copy of the world, since the world itself is ceaselessly changing. There are not many people who would accept the idea of objective and universal reality. The most widely accepted theory in contemporary physics is the String theory which implies the existence of parallel universes. One of the versions of the String theory (the so called M theory, considered to be the most extreme variation of the String theory) allows the existence of myriad parallel universes. Some scientists proved that communication and exchange of information among the universes is possible. Inspired by the String theory, we may deny the idea of the consensual reality and think of our world as the place where many universes overlap. The dialectical laws as well as the String theory imply that the main characteristic of the world is impenetrability. One cannot copy what one cannot perceive. One cannot copy what one cannot fully grasp. One cannot copy something as elusive as the world. Hence, the act of creation and the act of copying cannot be equal.

French existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre said that our existence precedes our essence. We never know who we are. We create ourselves continuously. We cannot even say that 'we are what we do' (as it is quite often said), since our decisions, our deeds alter their meaning when we change our perspective. Past events are not written in stone. They highly depend on the present moment. Since the world changes all the time and since we ourselves are liable to changes, since we are equally as elusive as the world is, we cannot accept that the copying of the world is in the core of the act of creation. What we created is liable to changes, it alters its meaning; or – to put it more precisely – the essence, the meaning of the object of art can never be known for sure, it always lurks beyond the existence of the object itself. Impenetrability is the main characteristic and the main advantage of art as the ultimate mean of expression and the medium for our thoughts and frustrations. That is why it is so important. If the world existed as a highly organized, zero-entropy, Newtonian kind of a place, if essence preceded the existence, we would not need art at all. Since art exists, it needs to exist in this form – the form of elusiveness – that is its only restraint. It can be compared to Sartre's ideas on freedom – the only thing we are not free to do is – to deny our freedom (to free ourselves from being free). The only thing an artist cannot do is to deny elusiveness, impenetrability, entropy, chaos, uncertainties of life, the overlaps of the virtual and real, overlaps of universes, overlaps of existence and essence. By denying essence, art succeeds in grasping it (think of the avant-garde art; it is the matter of a game; it is the ultimate denial of the idea of essence; Duchamp's toilet is the utmost example of the attempt to deny the essence of the world; most of the postmodern artists are concerned with overcoming the organized and meaningful in art; but eventually the chaos they try to promote becomes organized; their meaninglessness turns into meaningfulness). On the other hand, by trying to retain essence, art loses it forever (just think of the real-socialistic architecture, where essence and importance had been previously known, where creativity was killed by intention). To put it simply – art can never free itself from being free; otherwise it cannot be called art.

In the very simple world of Plato, where only the two worlds of eternal Forms and their copies exist, the definition of art as a mere act of copying reality could be acceptable. In fact, that is the only way art could exist (only as a mere act of copying the eternal ideas). But, if we do not so readily accept the ideas of Plato, and if we accept that our universe is a chaotic place, the definition of art as a mere act of copying does not remain satisfactory anymore. Nietzsche said that we have art in order not to die of the truth. And really, if we think of ourselves and our short lives, how weak and miserable we sometimes are, how unable we are to understand anything, to know anything for sure, if we think of the impossibility of achieving ideals, if we think of the certainty of death and forgetting, if we think of the cruel processes of ageing, if we think of the impossibility to really understand others, then what Nietzsche said perfectly makes sense. Another nihilistic philosopher – Gorgias – a sophist, claimed that 'Nothing exists, if it exists it cannot be known and if it can be known, it cannot be communicated'. These are the three levels of our weakness – the ontology, the epistemology and the ethics (the relativity of our own existence, our knowledge and our relations with other people) and these are the aspects where art can reassure us. Art is our shield that protects us from the relativity of our existence and the certainty of our finiteness. During the act of creation we do not question the world anymore, but we participate in the world. We create an object in the world (hence, we achieve the Being, and consequently we save ourselves from the terrifying ontological truths), we create a new meaning (we achieve the knowledge, denying the epistemological uncertainties) and a tool for communication (achieving the ability to truly understand other people and to create a basis for moral decisions).

The act of creation is the act where theory and practice unify. The act of creation is the act of denying and yet approving of the world. The act of creation of an object of art resembles Hegel's idea about the opposites that coincide. Through the act of creation we promote our imagination, we declare its victory over certainties, determinism and matter, and at the same time we deny the world; we deny and overcome its (immoral!) constraints, and when the process of creation is over, we let the object we created become a part of the world it denied, we let imagination and reality, theory and practice, spirit and matter, the reality of the virtual (as Slavoj Žižek would have said) and virtual reality, existence and essence (as Jean Paul Sartre would have said) coincide in it. Avant-garde art becomes mainstream (the famous case of French impressionism), mainstream becomes avant-garde (as in the famous case of Andy Warhol's works of art where the objects and the icons of the consumer, capitalist society became the main art works of the XX century).

What are the connections of art and the world?

How do we create? Is there a specific aspect of art that indicates that the distinction between art and the world is itself artificial? Do the world and art interweave in some way? These are the questions related to our experience of art. David Hume said that works of art are always unfinished – they become complete and finished when someone experiences them. To put it more colloquially – 'art is in the eye of beholder'. Art and the world interweave in that sense. The world is the starting and the ending point of the art of creation. It initiates the act of creation and perception becomes the final part of the process of creation.

Art is about overcoming, but it still requires something to overcome in order to exist. The idea resembles Husserl's idea on the intentionality of consciousness – consciousness is our starting point, but consciousness needs something to be *conscious of* in order to exist. Consciousness is highly dependent on the world. The world is its object, and thus its fundamental and constitutive part. Similarly, art is about denial and overcoming, but it needs an object to deny and overcome. Again, that object is the world. In that sense art and the world are interweaved. In that sense, it might be important to consider whether or not the world is worth copying.

Is the world worth copying (or is 'one of the damn things enough')?

Leibniz's unjustified optimism is famous in the history of philosophy. His claim that we live in the best of all worlds has been made fun of many times in the history of philosophy (the most famous example is Voltaire's 'Candid'). It is not only about the problems in the world that we are all concerned (wars, famine, freedom restraints, human rights abuses, and everything Leibniz would call evil). What can concern us more than these physical problems (the problems we are able to perceive and react to) is the relativity of our existence. Stephen Hawking (paraphrasing Leibniz) said that 'we live in the most probable of all worlds'. The implication of this claim to our everyday experience can be that there is no a steady Archimedean point in our lives, in our existence, in our thoughts. Kurt Gödel (who probably was the greatest mathematician in the past two centuries) thought that the whole idea of mathematics and science, especially the temptation for mathematical proofs, empirical proofs of our theories, correctness in the process of logical concluding, all the attempts of creating a system that can be used for testing the correctness of our assumptions (many philosophers and scientists – from Aristotle to Bacon - tried to create such a system), to put it simply – all science, all the desire for knowledge, all rationality - are in fact the derivations of our primordial need for security and reassurance. Philosophical and scientific knowledge cannot give us that kind of security since it is so liable to changes and it is never complete. Descartes said that the gradual increase of

knowledge is itself the greatest proof for the imperfectness. Hence, scientific and philosophical knowledge can be more hindering than helpful in the process of reassuring ourselves about the world. We need art. Science deals with probability; philosophy deals with speculations; but art deals with absoluteness.

The question whether or not the world is worth copying is completely irrelevant. Art is always more than copying reality. If the world was not worth copying, then art would show us the misery and evil that resides in the world, it would provoke our reaction and at the same time, it would show us the way out. On the other hand, if we consider the world in the way Leibniz did, art becomes unimportant, an empty activity of eternal self-perpetuation, i.e. it is not art anymore.

What would be the value of art if we reduced it to a mere and sole copy of reality?

Even though we cannot claim that art is strictly about copying the world, the relations of the world and art are deep and complex. They make one another possible. A chaotic world allows itself to be overcome. The world that is not perfect requires art in order to sustain its existence. In the Platonic world the existence of art is not necessary. But life in the world of fear and danger requires the reassurance that only art can give. Art can help us to believe in the Other, in a different world, in new possibilities. Art is there to show us that different existence is possible. Art is born out of frustration. Art is a materialized illusion. But at the same time, art is more real than reality itself since it deals with absolute, since it presents all the possibilities of the world and since it denies strict formalizations. What the world could be is more important and more realistic than what the world really is. What the world really is, according to Stephen Hawking, is the matter of probability, the matter of percentage; what the world can be is the matter of absoluteness and reality (beyond reality). The value of art is undeniable since it connects the possible and the real. If we reduced art to a mere and sole copy of reality, we would make it unable to fulfill its purpose, we would completely alter its meaning and we would make it valueless. Art needs to go beyond "reality". We would not need works of art if they were mere copies of some pre-existent objects.

Conclusion

The act of creation and art itself are interwoven with the world. As I previously said, art and the world need one another in order to sustain their existence. But the acts of copying and constraining the process of creation definitely decay what art is supposed to be. We cannot deny the influence and the importance of the world in the process of creation of new – artistic – worlds. But, to formalize art, to intentionally deny its complexity, to reduce it to the previously known horizons would mean to betray art and to deprive it of all its value and importance.