Another artworld is possible

Filippo Focosi
There's no doubt, Leibniz was wrong: this is not the best of all possible worlds. Were it so, wars would not have marked the history of mankind, nature's life cycle would have proceeded without the existence of insects, and the great football player Zinedine Zidane would not have ended his glorious career with the infamous headshot inflicted on Materazzi in the World Cup Final of 2006. Even in times of desperation, however, men found consolation in artworks which, with their beauty, profundity and inventiveness, made it possible to imaginatively escape from, or discover a deeper meaning in, the real world. But in our current troubled times, art no longer comforts us. Damien Hirst's diamond encrusted skulls and Maurizio Cattelan's child-like mannequins are supposed to embody the best contemporary artistic reflections on life and death, while Jeffrey Koons' balloon dogs or Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Third Paradise* claim to offer intelligent amusement or prompt spiritual elevation. And the worst thing is that such poor (in terms of the formal imagination employed and, as a consequence, of the conveyed meaning) works are featured in the most important exhibitions, sold at crazy prices, celebrated in critical reviews and philosophical books.

What might we do, as aestheticians, to reverse this trend, to make the world we inhabit, if not the best of all possible worlds, at least artistically better than now? I'll try to show that only an aesthetic definition of art, properly re-shaped in light of recent discussions, can do this job. In the first place, it can heal the world of visual arts, the most damaged of all. The world of classical contemporary music, even if it is populated by many good composers such as Steve Reich or Kevin Volans – whose music happily mixes a lot of various influences (such as African and electronic music) and techniques (from minimalist phasing to inclusive “maximalism”) to produce exhilarating listening experiences – has to face the reverse problem, insofar as musical institutions are still inclined to favor hyper-complex and emotionally cold compositions, such as Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke*, whose *raison d'être* is to challenge the perceptive capacities of the listener. The other artforms seem to enjoy a better situation: think, for example, of the phenomenon of “indiestream” in popular music and cinema. The success gained by independent artists such as the Icelandic post-rock band Sigur Rós or the American film...
director and screenwriter Wes Anderson – who both became mainstream in virtue of a striking artistic quality recognized by audiences – is a sign of vitality of these fields, as is the renewed interest for extended narratives, both in literature and in TV series (think of the celebrated *Breaking Bad*, or Donna Tartt’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Goldfinch*). Anyway, we can equally arrive at a better appreciation of these works if we know and focus on what makes them artworks.

Each of the definitions of art that have been offered over the years (since the beginning of the XX century) took some acknowledged (and of special significance, in the opinion of their proposers) fact about art history as their starting point. The particular form that each theory has undertaken can be judged, firstly, from a descriptive point of view, that is, in terms of its linguistic and extensional power. By linguistic power, I mean being able to account for the correct use of the word “art”. By extensional power, I mean being able to accommodate the majority of the existent artworks. But this doesn’t exhaust our evaluation of the definition; we can also judge it from a normative point of view, that is, in terms of its theoretical and pragmatic power. By theoretical power, I mean, in the first place, being able to identify the components of the artworld, that is, the subjects who enter in the making, promoting and appreciating activities directed to artworks; and, in the second place, pointing out what kinds of value such subjects are going to search for in the artworks that the definition captures. By pragmatic power, I mean having the resources to answer these questions: is our current artworld (comprising both artworks and art-workers) as it should be? Is this the best of all possible artworlds? Usually, advocates of descriptive (i.e., classificatory) definitions don’t pose these questions; at best, they implicitly answer “yes”. But every kind of art definition has some consequences for the artworld we inhabit, if only in the form of a corroboration of the current state of affairs. And if we feel dissatisfied, we search for a definition which has the means to change the state we are in. Such a definition, I’m going to argue, takes the form of a suitably revised aesthetic-formalist definition of art, whose virtues will be clearer after analysis of its competitors.

It is common to start with the so-called traditional theories of art, the ones proposed by Clive Bell in 1914 and, nearly twenty years later, by Robin G. Collingwood. Bell, an important art critic who organized two exhibitions of post-impressionist painters at the Grafton Galleries of London, was inspired by painters such as Cézanne – for his ability to reveal, through a balanced arrangement of chromatic patches, the inner architecture of the visible world – and took his example not only as tracing the future path of art history, but also as shedding new light on the art of the past, which has thus to be valued only for its formal aspects. He famously remarked that «either all works of art have some qualities in common, or when we speak of “works of art” we gibber»; and identified this common quality with «significant form», that is, with the whole set of relations between lines and colors that arouse in the spectator a special kind of emotion, which he labeled «aesthetic emotion». Given this criterion of identification, the extension of artworks captured by such a definition cannot but be limited, not only to visual arts, but also to the formal aspects of them, which evidently don’t cover their entire import, which in many cases includes a representative or symbolic content (which could be discovered also in pure abstract art: think of Kandinsky’s theorization on the emotive potentiality of colors and lines). Limited, but in a sense virtuous, is the corresponding artworld, which would comprise inspired artists engaged in imagining and realizing thrilling combinations of forms and relations; sensible observers who must possess and exercise their «innocent
formal eyes» (to borrow an expression from Nick Zangwill); and visionary, albeit one-dimensional, gallerists and exhibitions curators, who would seek for, and promote, only avant-garde artists working in the post-impressionist and abstract fields. With Collingwood – according to whom «art proper» aims at the expression, or «lightening», of some emotional state that the artist feels, but of whose nature he is unconscious – we would have a similar narrow-minded but qualified artworld, this time oriented to the expressive or emotive, instead of formal, value of artworks.

Putting aside the problems of circularity and narrowness that such definitions encounter, what the so-called neo-Wittgensteinian philosophers (such as Weitz and Kennick) indicated as the main problem of traditional theories of art was their ignorance of a fundamental fact about art practice: the possibility, if not the constant aim of art, of changing its basic means and ends; of introducing and pursuing innovation. This entails that art is an open concept, and so cannot be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Then, how can we establish if a certain object or performance is an artwork? The method proposed by Weitz is that of «family resemblances»: if we compare an object with a set of acknowledged artworks, look closely, and find some «strands of similarities» between them, then we can decide to call the object in question an artwork. It is clear, as has been frequently observed by many commentators, that no kind of similarity conditions having been specified, the world of artworks runs the risk of becoming so wide as to include almost everything, given that we can nearly always find some feature that two different objects or events have in common (for instance, containing yellow marks can figure both in my personal doodle as in a Kandinsky painting, but that hardly makes the former an artwork). The resulting artworld is a very pluralistic one, compatible with the pursuing of very different kinds of values, innovation and originality certainly being the most prominent of all.

The way to escape from this impasse was traced in the Sixties by Maurice Mandelbaum, who asserted that even if no common exhibited feature can be found among all artworks, we can still search for some relational attribute, which connects the artwork with something beyond itself, not directly perceivable or observable in the work but entailing a background (historical, cultural and social) knowledge. In a similar vein, Arthur Danto famously argued that «to see something as art requires something that the eye cannot descry: an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld». The artistic circumstance that drove him towards this line of thinking was the fact that a lot of artworks, from Duchamp’s Fountain up to Andy Warhol’s Brillo Box, were indiscernible from their ordinary counterparts, so that something outside the realm of the aesthetical should have to be invoked to make clear the distinction between such pairs of indiscernibles. The identifying criterion, the «artworld», was subsequently characterized by George Dickie in social terms, as an human institution which consists in a variety of roles (artist, gallery owner, audience, professional critic, museum director, exhibitions curator, and so on) engaged in an established activity or practice. In the case of the visual arts system, for instance, this activity involves the creation of an artifact by the artist (even when it implies no more than a mental act, as is the case for ready-mades); the presentation to an invited audience of the artifact in question in the context of an art gallery or museum exhibition, introduced and supported by a critical review or a documented catalogue; a broad promotion through specialized magazines; and, last but not least, a good vernissage. When such conditions are satisfied, the artifact in question

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acquires «the status of a candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld)»\(^7\), and so becomes an artwork.

It’s not difficult to understand why this theory has gained so much popularity: indeed, it reflects what happened in the last fifty years; the field of visual arts has been occupied by a lot of works whose primary aim is to draw attention to themselves, often by means of shocking and irritating stratagems, so as to obtain the right to be presented to the art-public inside some art-institution. But – as Wollheim\(^8\) rightly observed – if no reason for institutional presentation must be given by the artworld agents, how can they convince the audience that their decisions are not arbitrary? (Sometimes, a good vernissage is not enough to do the job). And if appreciation plays no role in determining the art-status of a certain object or event, what kind of value, apart from economical one, can be assigned to it?

What the perceived narrowness of the artworld as construed by institutional theories induced was a return to a more concrete approach to the art question. Hence, the «second wave» (borrowing a terminology introduced in Kaufman 2007) of philosophers seeking for an essentialist definition of art maintained that the essence of art was again to be found in a relational condition, but identified the second term of the defining relation with the concrete history of creating and treating art. What supported such a stance was the observation, as offered by Jerrold Levinson, that «there is deeper continuity in the development of art than is generally noted»\(^9\): that there is «something common» between such diverse artworks as (limiting ourselves to the field of visual arts) Botticelli’s Venus, Picasso’s Le Demoiselles d’Avignon and J.M. Basquiat’s Irony of Negro Policeman. That common thing was identified by Levinson with the intentional (even if in some case just implicit) connection to preceding art, that is, to an integral set of ways of regard appropriately accorded to some acknowledged preceding artworks. In a similar vein, some years after Levinson’s first statement, James Carney argued that what determines the arthood of an object is its showing some resemblance with the style correctly attributed to some past artistic movements\(^10\); and Noël Carroll, while distancing himself from the defining project, nonetheless indicated the criterion for identifying an artwork in its being engaged in a conversation with some acknowledged artistic tradition or movement, that is, in being an answer to some acknowledged formal, expressive or semantic problems borrowed from the past, and in evolving the means for their solution.

These historical strategies are undoubtedly useful in helping us to overcome the apparent barriers between works employing different, but equally effective, artistic strategies. But in the end, their proposers weakened this inner connection when they decided to include, in the set of backward references that make something art, the act of pure refusal of the past that marked a lot of contemporary works (especially conceptual ones). Levinson’s appeal to artist intention is of no help, insofar as some works are art despite the artist intention (as Daniel Kolak\(^11\) remarked, quoting Kafka’s novels The Trial and The Castle, which were rightly considered literature by the audience even if their author asked his editor, Max Brod, to destroy them after his death). And even when the intention underlying the artistic act is appropriate, a question of legitimacy still arises: what authorizes the artist to intend his work for some set of art-regards appropriate to some art of the past if not the thought that by so considering it, an experience of some value would be produced in the perceiver? And what would assure us that the work suits such ways of regard, if not the perceiver’s undergoing a worthwhile aesthetic experience as a result? Without the appeal to such supplementary functional condition\(^12\), and appealing

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only to backward-references internal to a certain tradition, it’s also hard to give account of non-western traditions of making and appreciating art.

The problem of these historical theories, in my opinion, is that, while rightly underlining the importance of there being inter-connections between artworks, they don’t try to explain what these connections consist in, and under what conditions they give rise to an *artistic* tradition. Such reasons not having been given, what remains is an artworld where the spectators are satisfied with a well elaborated narrative that connects some alleged artworks with some universally approved artworks of the past, not asking if the network of relations envisaged by the critic is the right one, or not verifying, based on their own experiences, if it really holds. In such an artworld, contextual and rhetorical values (intended in their pejorative sense) prevail, and tricky critics or artists who talk philosophically have the upper hand.

To be fair, Carroll specifies that historical narratives establishing art status must be true. But we should ask: true to what? Indeed, according to Carroll an historical narrative can do its job, i.e., can fill the gap between a contested work and some antecedent artistic practices, if it is «accurate», «time-ordered», and if elucidates the artist’s assessment of the situation and shows «how the choices that comprise the artwork are sensible or appropriate means to the artist’s end»; this doesn’t implies that such choices work. The narrative has to be «intelligible» (that is, true in its form) but not «veridical» (that is, true in its substance). But intelligibility is too weak a condition for a narrative to hold in our current times, given the fact that, on one side, the vast majority of post-modern artworks make references – by means of quotations, mimicking, juxtaposition, fusion, transformation, etc. – to other artistic styles; and, on the other side, nearly every would-be artist can build his own narrative via publicity in art journals, gallery handouts, catalogues, personal websites, and so on. And, as not every artistic “theft”, even if legitimate, is creative – as the Dutch composer Louis Andriessen, himself an advocate of musical and artistic contamination, once remarked –, so a well-developed narrative is not enough to enable a work to sustain repeated fruition, to embody significant meanings, to arouse intense aesthetic experiences: in a word, to make it an artwork.

Robert Stecker subsequently advanced a disjunctive version of the historical definition of art, where the most important instances of artworks are correctly classified as art in virtue of their having been intended to fulfill at least one of the functions typical of the central art forms of our tradition, so that objects or events created outside the connective web of conscious intentional backward references to past art-functions can obtain the status of arthood when achieve excellence in fulfilling some of these functions. Such are the cases of primitive art, non-western art traditions, aesthetically pleasing industrial artifacts, and works springing from unconscious intentions. But here lies an asymmetry that, as I see it, can lead to paradoxical effects. Indeed, what if all the artworks produced in recent times would pass the test for arthood just in virtue of revealing – by means of such things as artist’s pronouncement and journal’s reviews – a purposive orientation on the part of the maker, and without successfully fulfilling the functions (such as providing the work with balance and expressivity) which he calls for? (This is a risk that art-definitions belonging to the classificatory kind have to face). We would be surrounded by a myriad of artworks entering the realm of the “official” world of art with the help of no more than a well elaborated historical narrative, irrespective of their actual power of arousing experiences as valuable as that produced by some paradigmatic artworks to which they have been linked by some skillful critic; whereas our quest for quality could
be satisfied only with works of commercial, industrial or naïve art. Horrible paintings and boring musical compositions would be put side by side with elegant cars and lovable ringtones for mobile phones: if not the worst, this would surely be the most bizarre of all possible artworlds!

13 The advocates of an historical approach to art definition thought it necessary – in order to preserve the possibility of radical mutations in art history – to not specify a fixed set of functions, or ways of regards, to which artworks should be (intentionally or unconsciously) connected. But what if indentifying a limited set of historical functions or ways of regards shared by artworks belonging to different cultures and epochs proved to be possible, while not undermining the possibility of changes in art traditions? It is at this stage that philosophy meets cultural studies: comparing the central art-forms developed in the diverse (western and non-western, current and remote) artistic traditions, a group of philosophers including Berys Gaut, Denis Dutton, and Julius Moravcsik, around the turn of the twenty-first century, discovered a common, natural core of creative and receptive artistic practices, which can be summed in the following criteria: 1) arousing of a direct pleasure; 2) expression of emotions; 3) creativity and imagination; 4) possession of formal properties; 5) semantic/symbolic richness; 6) individuality and novelty; 7) being part of a tradition of production and critical reception. By fixing such a list of common features, these authors clarified what distinguishes an artistic tradition from a similar backward-looking but not-artistic tradition (such as scientific tradition, where the recognition of preceding theories cannot be avoided before experimenting some novel approach to some existing problem). Thus, substantial progress has been made, with respect both to the narrowness of the artworld born out of institutional or intentional-historical theories and to the dispersive pluralism of art works and art approaches that the absence of any precise identifying criterion gives rise to. Anyway, if on one side, by allowing that an object or event can be an artwork even in the case it satisfies a (numerically) indeterminate subset of the above criteria, this so-called «cluster concept of art» (as Gaut labeled it) can accommodate borderline cases and commercial art, on the other side it turns out to be too inclusive, given the fact that a lot of things exhibit some of these criteria, while not being recognized as artworks. Think of the emotional and aesthetic aspects of football, or the elegance and individuality of a scientific of philosophical book; or think of the absence of emotional and aesthetic/formal aspects in many ready-mades and performances.

14 To further improve the artworld arrived at, we still need to take into account another fact which occurred in the formation and development of artistic (western and non-western) traditions: the primacy of aesthetic properties. Indeed, as Stephen Davies argued in several papers written in the Nineties, the care for the aesthetic aspects that certain tribal artifacts (such as, for instance, the strikingly beautifully decorated and carved sculptures realized by the people of the Sepik River in Papa New Guinea) show, is something that we, while belonging to different cultures and ages, can still appreciate, and this is the reason why they are classified as artworks and exhibited in art museums. This fact, while representing for Davies no more than an historical necessity, if linked with the recognized continuity which characterizes each of the known artistic traditions, introduces a hierarchy between the above cited list of trans-cultural artistic criteria, and assigns to the first rank the possession of formal and aesthetic properties, which, if correctly attributed to an object or a performance, admit it into the realm of artworks. Artists primarily are, and have always been, inventors of forms, through which they
express their distinctive views and contribute to the development of an art form. The content of an artwork (be it expressive, representative or symbolic) is relevant to its appreciation qua art insofar as it is appropriately embodied in, and articulated through, some interesting structure.

To render this point acceptable, we have to clarify, taking advantage of the insights that several philosophers gave us, what we intend by aesthetic formal properties (as distinguishable from non-aesthetic formal properties, i.e., from the structure or configuration of a work as discernible by means of ordinary, albeit trained, perceptive and intellective capacities). The form I’m referring to is aesthetic insofar as it amounts to having a good structure or configuration – and so requires a normative judgment (involving the exercise of taste on the part of the perceiver) to be noticed; that is, (it amounts to having) an organic interconnectedness of an artworks’ parts/elements, where these include purely formal components (such as lines, masses or colors in an abstract painting, or tones in instrumental music) as well as semantic or expressive components.

As for the latter, think of how the introduction of events or characters in a novel or film, of themes and modulations in a sonata, or of landscapes and figures in a painting – along with the affective, evocative or symbolic imports that such characters, themes or sceneries bring with themselves – represent additional sources for the artist to achieve a higher order of coherence and completeness in the plot, composition, or design of the work. This kind of global aesthetic form I take to be constitutive of the vast majority of artworks, albeit admitting different degrees, so that some of them are aesthetically better than others.

But artworks – it is widely acknowledged – are appreciated also (and sometimes mainly) for their content alone, especially if bearing remarkable expressive qualities. So why think that any artwork must possess formal aesthetic properties? Because – that’s my hypothesis – when we describe an artwork (or some part of it) as, for instance, solemn, ironic, sad, or even terrible, and praise it for having such qualities, we recognize and appreciate it for being a successful exemplification of such qualities, a beautiful realization of an expressive or symbolic intention by means of a good (i.e., organic, coherent, complete) formal combination and interpenetration of the resources (sounds, colors, words, at the most basic level; or figures, phrases, propositions, neutrally conceived as rough materials that have still to take their final shape) that each artistic medium makes available to the creator. Aesthetic properties, even non-formal ones, all are emergent, Gestalt properties; they are the product of a unique synthesis of non-aesthetic features, and so they all comprise a formal component, which, adequately conjoined with expressive or semantic sources (such as themes, characters or sceneries) determine their very nature (their being, for instance, sad, melancholic, happy, serene, threatening, hopeful, majestic, and so on).

To take account of such enduring intuitions about art and gather them under the same philosophical umbrella, I propose to adopt the following definition: an artifact (object or performance) is a work of art if and only if it possesses, by virtue of an intentional act on the part of a given agent, a sufficient degree of interpenetration of form and content, so that an experience with a marked aesthetic character is prompted in the sensitive perceiver. From a descriptive point of view, such a definition has the virtue of accommodating the vast majority of artworks produced in every culture and artform, including the avant-garde and post-modernism (excluded from this realm would be only the anti-aesthetic art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries). The primacy of formal
aesthetic properties, as shared by artworks belonging to different traditions, forms or genres, doesn't limit originality and innovation: the inextinguishable formal imagination of genuine artists gets ceaselessly reactivated when confronted with new stimuli provided by cultural and social mutations or by personal and artistic growth. At the same time, while avoiding Bell's and Collingwood's rigidity, this definition works as well towards a refinement of the taste of the perceivers and invites us to make a selection between the myriad of artworks that have been produced in the last decades. It is at this stage that historical knowledge reveals its very role, which is not that of classifying things as either art or non-art by placing them inside a stylistic matrix, but that of offering us subsidiary strategies to reinforce our aesthetic judgment, which in turn becomes more focused and accurate if informed and contextualized; in the same way as «comparisons» between «different kinds of beauty» help the Humean critic to improve his delicacy of taste and enable him to estimate «their proportion to each other». This does not mean, however, that a work's aesthetic value can be derived from historical considerations alone. We can, for instance, view the work of a contemporary figurative painter against the backdrop of his entire œuvre, or of artistic movements (such as Trans-Avantgarde or Neo Expressionism: in my opinion, two of the most valuable among the current trends in the field of visual arts) to which it could be reasonably connected. But in the end, we can assign an artistic merit to it only if such an overarching experience proves to be aesthetically rewarding, that is, if it fully engages and promotes the harmonious interaction of all our mental capacities («sensuous perception, informed by cognition, enlarged by imagination, and prompting emotional responses»).

On the normative side, this revised version of the aesthetic definition of art, if embraced, would help to give rise to an artworld in which artists would seek for new modalities of beautifully expressing classical or original subjects and personal views and thoughts, and in which audiences would exert their right to judge the work of the artist on the basis of the intensity of the aesthetic experience that it offers them. In such an artworld, much less money would be spent by cultural institutions for encouraging works made with the only intention of shocking, irritating or surprising (think of much conceptual and body art); and much less time would be devoted to their interpretation, including the philosophical one. The consequences would not be limited to the field of visual arts: the community of art-lovers would escape performances of aleatory or strictly dodecaphonic music, where no design is perceivable through the ears, and no inner sense seems to motivate the proceeding from one musical passage to the following ones; and would not focus on the meaning of a film or of a literary work in itself, but also (or mainly) on the modes of its presentation, that is, on how the fictional world works and contributes to an emotive or descriptive end. Artworks would be cherished by all the members of the artworld for their aesthetic value – as it has been in the past –, that is, for the effects that good aesthetic experiences exert upon us. As Monroe Beardsley argued, aesthetic experience helps to create integration within the self, refines perception and discrimination, develops the imagination, fosters mutual sympathy, and offers an ideal for human life, means and ends being so closely interrelated that no separation, emptiness or frustration is felt. There are thus ample reasons to follow this path.
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NOTES

1. Ralph Vaughan Williams’ Pastoral Symphony, while somewhat related to the First World War, depicts peaceful musical landscapes wonderfully alternating with gently elegiac and mysteriously dark moods. Insects found their place in some beautiful Flemish still-life paintings. And Zidane’s movements, ball controls, emotions and tensions were filmed, selected and assembled by two video-makers (Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno) in their interesting and intense documentary film Zidane: A XXI century portrait.

2. As it is stated by Shusterman 2000.

3. Bell 1914: Ch. 1.


5. Collingwood 1938.

14. Levinson opens the door to the inclusion of such a functional corollary to his intentional-historical definition in Levinson 1989: 54-56.
20. It is well known how Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* was influenced by Iberian sculpture and African wooden masks’ striking formal inventiveness and expressive angularity; as is widely acknowledged the fascination that Indonesian Gamelan music, in virtue of its harmonious integration of gradually interlocking patterns, exerted upon Western composers such as Debussy, Britten and the Canadian Colin McPhee.
21. We owe to Dewey the distinction between mere configuration (which he calls «shape or figure») and aesthetic form, the latter implying the «interfusion of all properties of the medium», so that a material (sensuous as well as intellectual) becomes adequately («completely and coherently») formed, and «an experience» of an unusual and remarkable level of immediacy, vitality and intensity (i.e., an aesthetic experience) is produced (Dewey 1934: Ch. 6, 106-133). In a similar vein, Beardsley (1958: 190-200) later talked of a special sense of «form», as applying to those aesthetic objects that are «highly organized», «well ordered», or «unified», i.e., «coherent» (every part or internal relation being at the right place – or occurring at the right time – and obeying to a specific, albeit not preconceived, function), and «complete» (there being no feeling, when experiencing the work of art, that some more part or relation could be needed to satisfy its underlying purpose). As for the particular relation between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties – the former depending on the latter for their very character, while being irreducible to any combination of them – we cannot but refer to Sibley’s seminal papers of the Fifties and Sixties (now collected in Sibley 2001).
23. My proposal closely resembles that forwarded by Richard Eldridge, who stated that what is necessary and sufficient for a thing’s being classified as an artwork is its possession of a «satisfying appropriateness to one another of a thing’s form and content» (Eldridge 1985: 246). But it also resonates with the aesthetic thought of philosophers such as Kant, Croce, Dewey, Beardsley and even the later Danto (cf., for instance, Danto 2003), to the extent that they assigned an irreplaceable role, in our understanding and appreciation of art, to the principle of interpenetration of form and content (be it defined as organic unity, coalescence or fusion, adherent beauty, and so on).
24. We should nevertheless be more indulgent with Bell and Collingwood, as far as they recognized the complex interactive experience artworks call for. Indeed, while Bell specified that the representative elements of the paintings must be fused with, and permeated by, the rhythm of the composition, Collingwood argued that the expressive act (both productive and receptive) is successful only if guided by an apt, intense and complete imaginative object.
25. Hume 1757.
26. This is part of Alan Goldman’s broad view of aesthetic experience (Goldman 2013: 233).
27. Of course, I’m not talking here of those marvelous examples which combine tonal and atonal language – such as Bernstein’s *Halil* or Copland’s *Piano Fantasy* – where the composer uses freely and intelligently some dodecaphonic series to produce unconventional but not ungraspable musical structures.


**ABSTRACTS**

There’s no doubt, Leibniz was wrong: this is not the best of all possible worlds. In the past, men found consolation in artworks which, with their beauty, profundity and inventiveness, made it possible to imaginatively escape from, or discover a deeper meaning in, the real world. But in our current troubled times, art no longer comforts us. Damien Hirst’s diamond encrusted skulls and Maurizio Cattelan’s child-like mannequins are supposed to embody the best contemporary artistic reflections on life and death, while Jeffrey Koons’ balloon dogs or Michelangelo Pistoletto’s *Third Paradise* claim to offer intelligent amusement or prompt spiritual elevation. And the worst thing is that such poor (in terms of the formal imagination employed and, as a consequence, of the meaning conveyed) works are featured in the most important exhibitions, sold at crazy prices, celebrated in critical reviews and philosophical books. What might we do, as aestheticians, to reverse this trend, to make the world we inhabit, if not the best of all possible worlds, at least artistically better than now? I’ll try to show that only an aesthetic definition of art, properly re-shaped in light of recent discussions, can do this job, by offering us criteria of classification that also have normative force.

Non c’è alcun dubbio, Leibniz si sbagliava: non viviamo nel migliore dei mondi possibili. In passato, l’arte perlomeno forniva all’uomo consolazione sotto forma di opere che, con la loro bellezza, profondità e inventività, suggerivano vie d’uscita dalla realtà o dischiudevano nuovi orizzonti. Ma ai nostri giorni, non ci è più possibile trovare conforto nell’arte, specie se ci immergiamo nel mondo delle arti visive, dove a dominare incontrastate il mercato, a ricevere le più entusiastiche recensioni critiche e a stimolare l’interesse dei filosofi sono opere davvero povere d’immaginazione formale e, conseguentemente, di contenuto incarnato. Basti pensare ai teschi tempestati di diamanti di Damien Hirst, ai bambini-manichini appesi da Cattelan a un albero di Porta Ticinese a Milano, ai cani di palloncini di Jeffrey Koons, o al Terzo Paradiso di Pistoletto. Cosa possono fare gli studiosi di estetica per invertire la rotta, per rendere il nostro mondo, se non il migliore dei mondi possibili, per lo meno artisticamente più allettante di quello odierno? La risposta la si potrà trovare nella messa a punto di una definizione estetica dell’arte e di un perfezionamento dei suoi criteri di classificazione, che sono anche norme di valutazione.

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**Parole chiave:** arte, definizione di arte, formalismo

**Keywords:** artworld, art-definition, formalism