Art without artistic intention: The case of "Planking"

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to acknowledge Planking-performances and their photographs as works of art, in particular of Conceptual Art, by examining both the ontology of artworks as well as the specific characteristics of Conceptual Art. Even if there is no artistic intention, the learned viewer has the potentiality to classify a non artistic entity as an artistic one, by using his\her philosophical and art-historical knowledge. During this procedure he/she functions as a conceptual artist himself/herself, as he\she creates a new way of thinking about the certain work and re-ignites the relationship between art and cognition.

According to the traditional definitions of art, the triptych "artist-artwork-perceiver" has always functioned as a necessary condition of the artistic procedure. The artist, even as the manipulated executor of certain orders [1], has always been the absolute starting point for the creation of the artwork. Even during the modernistic revolution the fundamental changes that were promoted concerned mostly the ontology of the artwork and never its identity as the product of an artist: artworks were released from their traditional boundaries of beauty, imitation and perfection in technical matters, and often transformed into common, disgusting or even incorporeal objects, but they still continued to be fundamentally connected to a creator with artistic intention.

The artist gained more importance in modern and postmodern time than ever in the past. From the Duchamp-era onwards, artists have acquired the power to transform anything into art, only by identifying it as such. To this framework belong statements such as Kurt Schwitters, who in a moment of Dadaistic paroxysm claimed that even the artist's spittle was art, or even artworks such as Manzoni's "Merda d' Artista" (1961), which were one more indication of the divine position of the artist: by his signature even his excrement was proclaimed and glorified as artworks.

More passive has been the role of the perceiver of art. He/She was always meant to approach artworks in an evaluative, but never in an ontological manner. The spontaneous viewer has been meant to gain a (mostly shallow) aesthetic experience by his/her contact with the artwork, while the more educated one has been understood to be able to make substantial evaluative judgments. Even artworks that were rejected in the past as inappropriate, e.g. by ecclesiastic authorities, were not questioned in a classifying manner as artistic identities, but just as artistic creations that didn't fit into the aesthetic and ethical codes of the era. However, in the 20th century the perceivers'-community seemed to gain a more important role in the definition of an artifact as artwork. Both everyday and theoretic practices showed that the wide artistic and cultural community shared this responsibility with the artists, who moreover in the framework of certain theories appeared as "dead" releasing their artworks to an autonomous course through history [2].

In all cases, however, the artist, as the educated or just the inspired (uneducated) creator of the artwork, has always been the first ground. Even if he/she followed certain orders, was strongly manipulated or didn't immediately create the artwork, but just had the idea for its creation as the case has often been from Rodin and onwards, his/her being has always functioned as the most fundamental principle of its ontology.

The entity "artwork" has been understood as inseparable from the entity "artist", which has also immediately been connected to the notion of "artistic intention".

A definition to the term "artistic intention" is not easily given, as it involves many parameters related both to the creator and the perceiver. If we exclude the dominant case of the artist (by education or even by inspiration) who deliberately creates an artwork, there are cases of creations that could be recognized as artworks, independent of an immediate artistic intention, if and only if they fulfill certain prerequisites that might turn a creative intention into an artistic one, even in an unconscious manner. A creative intention might be recognized as an artistic one, if its fundamental features are to be identified with those of past artistic intentions within the framework of historical narratives. During a procedure as such, the role of the definition of a creation as an artwork shifts from the artist to the perceiver. If an educated perceiver possesses the ability to argue in a satisfying and complete manner showing both, that a certain creative intention is to be identified with similar artistic intentions in the course of art history, and that the completed creation fulfills the ontological artistic prerequisites, he/she has the power to pronounce this creation to be an artwork. Thus, he/she becomes an artist himself/herself, and particularly a conceptual one, as he/she articulates a new idea concerning it. The perceiver is not its first creator, but its re-creator and much more the person who gives to it its new identity as an artwork.

In order to show that artworks might exist independently of their traditional necessary conditions of the artist and the artistic intention, and exist only just due to the perceiver's approach, I will next examine the case of Planking, a kind of game played and photographed all over the world. I will try to show that quite opposed to its creators' and participants' intentions, the whole procedure and its results fulfill the requirements for recognizing them as artistic ones. My aim is to create a new framework of thought about this game that will lead to its identification as art and thus I will become myself an artist in a conceptual manner. This approach to art is not only important because it gives a new perspective to the potentials of the art-perceivers and reveals another aspect of conceptual art, but also because it provides another point of view to the relation between art and knowledge: an educated viewer by using his/her information from the field of history and philosophy of art might become an artist not by creating something new, but by giving to an existing non artistic creation a new artistic meaning.

Planking performances and photographs as artworks

Planking is a quite new fad, which began about 14 years ago in Britain and since then gained thousands of followers from all over the world. It is described variously as the "Lying Down Game", the "lazy man's free-running, a "pointless internet craze", the "new flash-mobbing" and a "sick, pagan pastime" [3]. The activity consists, firstly, of lying face down in an unusual and inappropriate location with the arms held tight against the sides of the rigid body palms flat against the flanks, in imitation of a wooden plank. Secondly, a photograph is taken and posted on the internet. Several persons appear as the inventors, such as the comedian Tom Green in 1994, or the then teenagers Gary Clarkson and Christian Langdon, who performed it in public spaces in order to amuse one another and baffle onlookers. Planking soon became a fashion, which turned into a craze in 2007 when the two created a Facebook group about it.

The Planking group is today filled with thousands of photographs from all over the world, with the Plankers carrying out their performances in the most crazy and unimaginable places.

My initial reaction, when I saw Planking- photographs on the Internet, was mostly positive as I instinctively felt that they definitely represented a trend in art. At a second level of thinking I attempted a more objective approach by finding ways to explain what made them artworks. I referred to basic ontological theories of art and took into serious account certain particularities, such as the absence of artistic intension and the multiple performances of the same idea by different persons. Soon I realized that during this procedure I was working both as an art historian and as a conceptual artist, as by using my knowledge I was creating an artistic thought for an entity that was not initially seen as artistic. As much as Conceptual Art is defined as the art, in which concepts and ideas dominate over traditional aesthetic and material features, such a claim is totally legitimate. However, next I will unfold my argumentation on Planking as art by referring to certain aspects of several ontological theories, such as the Imitation Theory, the Neo-Representational Theory, the Theory of Semiotic, the Expression Theory, the Theory of Formalism and other Aesthetic Theories of art [4].

In all photographs, the same motive is repeated by different persons, who obviously -according to the name-- imitate a wooden plank. Imitation is the earliest known feature of art, as Plato and Aristotle recognized it as the necessary condition of all artistic practices: anything classified as an artwork must possess it. The imitation theory explained ancient visual art, but had also a great impact on the development of the arts until the 19th century. Is Planking art according to the imitation theory? From one point of view it is. We should though think more in terms of representation when we speak about imitation, as the participants' bodies are intended to stand for wooden planks and don't literally imitate them. We would rather speak of a semiotic representation as the bodies function as signs or symbols of the particular natural object. Of course a semiotic representation needs a relevant system, a conventional language to refer to, in order to decipher it. Planking as a symbolic-representation form hasn't any previews or references, but establishes a benchmark for such representations in the future. The huge number of participations has created a language that is based on the consensus that a certain position of the body refers to a wooden plank.

Planking as art belongs to the tradition of artworks that speak about the nature of art. They are about something, not only about resembling a wooden plank, amusing and mocking the viewer, or even showing the slave trade-era practice and manner of stowing African slaves upon the planks of a slave ship's lower hold [5], but much more about the potentiality of an activity (and its photograph) to be pronounced as an artwork despite the initial intention of its creator. A crucial question that is to be answered later in this paper is about the power of the interpreter to create an artwork by giving to a non artistic activity an artistic-semantic content. This insight has been partly discussed in the theories of Wimsatt- Beardsley and Barthes, but only on an interpretational basis and not on an ontological one [6].

A creator (artist), an audience and a shared idea are the necessary conditions for the existence of an artwork. The absence of an artist in the case of Planking does not imply the absence of a creator at all. There was an initial creator who conceived the idea that has been followed by all the performers who made it real. The problem lies in the fact that neither the initial conceiver nor the performers recognize themselves as artists and their activity as an artistic one. The other two conditions are complete and could clearly speak for Planking as art: there is an audience and a shared idea. The audience, which in several blogs partly acknowledges Planking as art, is reached through the internet that functions as a contemporary worldwide museum. The ideas that performers and viewers share are of cognitive, expressive, or aesthetic value, depending each time on the performers' intentions and the viewers' interpretations. The above mentioned potential symbolism of the slave-trade derives from the interpretation field, as -according to the Plankers' words- such an intention never existed from their side. What was then their intention? As Clarkson (one of those who claim to be the inventors) puts it: "It was just a really stupid, random thing to do" and "People generally think you 're mad. That's sort of the point" [7]. So, Plankers want to provoke a kind of shock in the viewers by doing something that deconstructs their usual worldview. This is not new in art: ever since the metaphysical school and surrealism, artists have often been connecting disrelated things in random frames in order to disclose the reality that may be hidden behind our common views.

However, no one can speak with certainty about the intentions of each performer separately – it could be that some of them feel like an artist performing an artwork. The point is that they all express something by communicating it to their audience, which is a necessary condition for the art status. But even if some understand planking as meaningless, which means that the performances and their photographs fail to intrigue their thought in any cognitive, emotional or philosophical direction, they can't avoid being impressed by the unusual form of the performers' bodies: the human body loses its natural shape and function, and acquires a new "significant" form [8] that intrigues our eyes by provoking in us an aesthetic experience. So, even if the Planking-creator had no conscious artistic intention, he had an inward aesthetic one, which is disclosed by some features of the photographs such as their diversity gained by the unusual combinations of places and bodies, their unity in structure and their intensive impact on the viewers: by adjusting to the rules of the works, their perceivers attend them in a "disinterested" manner [9], and thus gain aesthetic pleasure only by what they see and not due to other ulterior causes. Also the performers acquire aesthetic pleasure as they act released from the pressures of the conventions of ordinary life.

The performers' intentions and their importance for acknowledging Planking as art Up to this point I have classified Planking as art by referring to certain aspects of some ontological theories of art. It is, though, possible that some of the mentioned features of the performances and their photographs could also stand for other activities, such as the activity "game". We can't overlook that the initial intention of the Planking-creators was to play a game that should provoke a kind of aesthetic experience in the viewers. Next, I will try to show that Planking can be both a game and an art. In order to show that its creators' intentions are also artistic in a wider sense, I will apply the Institutional Theory of Art [10] as well as the Theory of Historical Definition [11].

It is not the first time that something has been created for non-artistic reasons and afterwards gets classified as an artwork. E.g. a car has been designed to serve practical functions, but a car collector may recognize artistic elegance in it and buy it for his collection as an artpiece. Or a Roman sword, which was initially produced as a weapon, is today part of a museum's collection not only as such but also as an artwork, because a curator has acknowledged its artistic value. These acts reflect the Institutional Theory, according to which a person by virtue of his/her knowledge, understanding and experience of art is qualified to act on behalf of the "Artworld" as a conferrer of a candidate for appreciation. The Institutional Theorists recognize as a necessary condition of art the existence of a creator (not necessarily with artistic intentions), its acknowledgment as such by a member of the "Artworld" and its display to the public. Planking fulfils all these prerequisites as , in this article, it has been acknowledged as art, despite its initial character, and thus it has been offered to the artistic community for appreciation.

The intentions of the creator, which are of no importance to the Institutional Theorist in order to classify an artifact as an artwork, play a decisive role for the Theorist of Historical Definition. Artistic intentions are, though, defined in a wider sense, as they are not understood only as aesthetic ones, but also as expressive in a general manner. The necessary condition in order to classify a product as an artwork, is that the intentions of its creator are historically well-presented ones. As mentioned above, the initial creators of Planking wanted to give their audience a jolt, to create a kind of shock, by the combination of transformed body-forms in unusual public places. The view of such an act (or its photographs) may in fact cause someone many diverse feelings, such as embarrassment, perplexity, surprise, joy or repulsion. He/she will react according to his way of thinking and experience of life: he/she may either leave indignant or will stay and think about it.

Giorgio de Chirico, who together with Alberto Savinio, Carlo Carra and Filippo de Pisis established in 1917 "Scuola Metafisica", attempted a new classification of reality on his canvases, by destructing it and putting its parts together anew in imaginative and bold combinations. Appolinaire, the most important theorist of Cubism and Abstraction in Paris, immediately discovered and underlined the superiority of De Chirico. He believed that the element of surprise, which played a decisive role in De Chirico's aesthetic, gave to modern art an authentic character. Surprise was for him the new way, through which the common status of mind and feelings could be brushed away, so that another fresh worldview would arise [12]. This would be possible only if common things could get released from the conventional causalities of the mind.

Causing surprise and shock to the viewer became a decisive intention for many artists. Max Ernst, who bridged Dada with Surrealism, also destroyed the coherence of reality by combining known with unknown elements. Surrealists acknowledged the visual arts as the most appropriate means to bring to the surface anything that lies deep in the subconscious. While consciousness is the place of cleanness and distinctness, the subconscious is a field of confusion and haze, where the being does not objectify reality but mostly identifies with it. Thus art is not a mere representation, but a vital communication of the person with the whole. Breton argued that the secret of

Surrealism lay in the conviction that something is hidden behind the common things. In order to discover the hidden reality, the person must get into a state of intensive shock, which may be caused by pictures that combine unfitted, unfinished and disturbing elements. Surrealists aimed at the de-alienating of the viewers through the de-realizing of reality. The psychic agitation, a basic component of surrealistic aesthetics, comprised a means for the abolition of the confines between mind and feelings.

M. Duchamp also caused shock by placing on exhibit his famous urinal, called "Fountain", in 1917, aiming to detach the viewer from his usual aesthetic approach to a more intellectual one. Since then many artists intended to surprise or even shock the viewers in order to make them think differently and in new directions. From the "Fuehrer" by Gottfried Helnwein, who in 1966 painted a picture of Adolf Hitler with his own blood, to "Helena: The Goldfish Blender" by Marco Evaristti, who in 2000 exhibited a live goldfish in blenders which viewers were invited to turn on, artists communicate their messages by creating uncomfortable feelings in the public.

Although Planking—performers don't call themselves artists, their intentions belong to this historical tradition. They transform their own bodies into a kind of plank and get photographed in unusual places that may look original both in a funny or a provocative-dangerous way. The interpretation depends on the viewer, as the creators have no further intentions. This, however, does not prevent us from acknowledging the performances and their photographs as artwork, which are be understood and interpreted independently from their creators' initial intentions.

"Planking" as Conceptual Art

Next I will argue about my conviction that Planking belongs to the wider era of Neo-Conceptual Art by referring both to the features of Conceptual Art and to its development through a historical narrative [13]. The Conceptual Art movement, that took place in the years 1966-72 and since then has influenced many artist up to our days, challenged the traditional form of the art object demanding a more active approach by the viewer. In particular, the conceptual work of art may truly exist only in the viewer's mental participation [14]. The main question that arises from viewing a conceptual artwork concerns the criteria of its acknowledgment as art and further more the limits for the classification of artworks. In the case of Planking another subject matter that comes up is the role of the intentions of its creator, and how much the absence of artistic intentions may be determinative for its classification as art. Also the role of the viewer comes into question, who owns the power to transform a non artistic entity into an artistic one, as discussed above.

I interpret Planking as a statement about the status of art. Art is a mental and applicative activity that originates in a person's creative imagination and encourages the public to think in new directions and to refresh its worldview. It has absolutely no need of labels: everybody becomes an artist, if he manages to create something that has an important impact on a group of persons, who finally acknowledge it as art. In order to make a valid and enduring classification and interpretation there should exist a sound argumentation, with references both to the main art theories and to art well-precedented regarding the framework of a historical narrative.

Planking serves common intentions both with Surrealistic Art (creation of a shock) and with Conceptual Art (speculation on the status of art in a philosophical manner). The first ones are immediate and have their origin in their creators, and the second are indirect as connected with the viewers' approach. Moreover, Planking shares many features with conceptual artworks both in a theoretical and an iconographic approach. In a theoretical approach, firstly, Planking is close to the group of ready-mades, as it also denies both its uniqueness and its artistic value originating from an artist-creator. The human body becomes a kind of ready-made that is photographed and disposed in a repeated manner. It might be understood as a commonplace object having the particular form of a plank. There is no artist, but an initiative idea and thousands of performers using their bodies to visualize it. This idea, and not the repeated actions and photographs, is the conceptual artwork, which gains this identity by interpretation. The notion that the educated perceiver through interpretation and not the artist through choice gives birth to the artwork, offers however a quite different character to Planking.

Secondly, Planking can also be seen as an intervention both in the real world and the virtual one of the internet. As well the viewer of a live performance, as the perceiver of its photographs on the internet, will be puzzled by the combination of the unusual form of the performers' bodies and their positioning in a contextually unmatched place. Their effort to understand what they see and to find a meaning in it, turns performances and their photographs into conceptual artworks. Thirdly, the act of photographing the performances and posting them on the Internet that then becomes a sort of international museum, also connects planking with those conceptual artworks, actions or ideas, that are presented by evidence (notes, maps, charts or photographs) [15].

In an iconographic approach, there are previous conceptual artworks that are related to planking performances. Actually they are to be understood as a part of the tradition that has been using the artist's body as art material. In particular they are closely connected both to the making of human sculptural forms that explore the body as an element in space, and also to the notion that anyone can become an artwork and an artist as well. Furthermore, there is common ground between planking and those conceptual art performances that involve risk and danger as fundamental features of their structures.

In the framework of Body Art, Planking has its forerunner in Dennis Oppenheim's "Parallel Stress" (1970), in which he constructed a large mound of earth, allowed himself to be photographed lying on a curve of it with his body following the curved shape and then hung himself from parallel brick walls by holding onto the walls with his hands and feet. The form of his body again followed the curved form of the mound. His aim was to shift the importance from the sculpture to the sculptor, who was the artist and the artwork as well. He used body art as a "calculated, malicious and strategic ploy" against the minimalistic exaggerated concern for the essence of the object. So, Oppenheim made works aiming more at the experience of sculptural form than at the articulation of its structure [16]. Moreover he explored the potential of the forms of the human body in extreme conditions and unusual positions features that are all to be found in Planking as well.

Oppenheim's performance "Parallel Stress" also involves elements of risk and danger. In this direction other conceptual artists are moving as well, sometimes exceeding the safety limits for their bodily integrity and much more for their lives: Marina Abramović performanced Rhythm 0 (1974), where she introduced herself to the public with a note which read "There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired. I am the object. During this period I take full responsibility" [17], Chris Burden asked someone to pin his hands onto a Volkswagen during his performance "Trans-fixed" (1974) [18], while the most extreme Austrian actionist Rudolf Schwarzkogler, aiming to reveal the disastrous nature of social mechanisms, caused self injuries and finally amputated a part of his body and killed himself [19]. There are some Plankers who take similar risks by lying in dangerous places like the edges of balconies in high buildings. In the press and on the internet there are reported injuries and deaths within the Planker community [20] that urged some bloggers to compare planking with the Darwinian Theory of natural selection: the most capable Plankers survive, while the weaker ones have to die. As much as this parameter of Planking-performances is in moral and safety terms unacceptable, it is still forms a basic feature of them that constructs their common ground with conceptual body-art performances. However, as the artistic intention is missing and the concept behind the Planking-performances is ambiguous and not of an artistic character, the one who might turn them to art and include them in the conceptual body art movement in a wider sense, is their interpreter by articulating an analytic argumentation based on theoretical and art-historical information.

Information and knowledge as means for the classification and evaluation of art The display of an artwork is a basic step towards its fulfillment that has as a necessary condition its acceptance by a satisfying number of people. The procedure is as follows: the artist creates an artwork, he/she applies to an art hall to display it and the competent persons decide to accept it or not. If they refuse it, it means that they didn't evaluate it as appropriate for their place. Thus, in most cases people have contact with already accredited artworks by seeing them in a museum, an art gallery or even printed in an art publication. This procedure is the traditional one and fulfils the prerequisite of the artist who consciously creates a work and offers it for acceptance and evaluation.

However, the case of Planking is an unconventional one, as there are no artists with artistic intentions and the display of the photographs has been done on the Internet, which is free and not dependant on the opinion of experts. Thus, its potential classification and evaluation as art becomes the responsibility of their perceivers, and most of the educated and knowledgeable ones in between. Their information in theoretical and historical matters is the fundamental parameter for a sufficient argumentation as the means for the classification of an initially not artistic work as art.

Information and knowledge have an ambiguous relation to art. While they are quite important in an external sense, as the basic features of the ones who classify and evaluate artworks, they play a lateral role as features of the artworks themselves. Artworks are not meant to be carriers of information, but mainly of aesthetic values: they ought to be evaluated only in aesthetic terms [21]. The Platonian classification and evaluation of art according to the criterion of truth is to be rejected, as artworks

are subjective expressions that have the potential both to remind us of the ideal values and to renew our personal ways of thinking.

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