Artistic Authenticity

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ARTISTIC AUTHENTICITY
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It. *Autenticità artistica*; Fr. *Authénticité artistique*; Germ. *Künstlerische Authentizität*; Span. *Autenticidad artística*. From ancient Greek αὐθεντεῖν ("to accomplish something by oneself," "to do independently," "to bear authority on something") and αυθεντικός ("being handmade"). It refers to the matching between a content (or being) and its expression (or appearance). The appearance of anything (whether quality, object, action, person etc.) is considered to be authentic, or not deceptive, when it is what it seems to be, being therefore genuine, original, spontaneous, immediate, natural etc. (cf. Varga, Guignon 2020).

The relationship of the notion of authenticity to art is tricky. Art is the realm of fiction, fantasy, and imagination. The falsity (or implausibility, or eccentricity) of a narration, an image, or an expression is not a sufficient condition of artistic failure, and vice versa, the veracity of artistic appearance is not a necessary condition for its success. Then the applicability of the notion of authenticity to art seems to require discussion in accordance with different artistic practices.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

The main kinds of authenticity at stake in the contemporary debate are the following:

1. Ontological / empiric authenticity.

2. Referential / documentary authenticity.

3. Expressive / personal authenticity.

4. Culture / genre / style Authenticity.

5. Performance authenticity (truthfulness to the work).

6. Artistic authenticity as success.

1. *Ontological / empiric authenticity*. Ontological authenticity refers to the artwork's property of being the material object traceable to a specific author as its producer. Accordingly, the artwork is deemed authentic, if it is the original item produced by its author. It is identified by differentiation from copies (or falsifications or fakes) and cases of plagiarism, which occur when the artwork is deliberately attributed to someone other (ordinarily a famous artist) than its actual maker.

A first question concerning genetic authenticity is whether it concerns only autographic arts (like painting and sculpture), where knowledge of the history of production is a necessary condition for the determination of the artwork's identity, or also allographic arts (like music and dance), where simple conformity to a notation would fulfill that task (see Goodman 1976). According to contextualists, the second answer is the right one: a sequence of sounds or words constitutes a different musical or literary work depending on who and in what historical context produced it. Still, even for autographic arts the answer to the empirical question about artwork's identity depends on authentication by experts, who are acknowledged by some recognized institution as authoritative in certifying an artwork's identity and origin. Authenticity as an empirical datum is certified through highly culturalized procedures which assign the item the value of being original and irreplaceable by means of attesting its empirical identity (Wetzel 2006; Knaller 2007).

The main aesthetic issue is whether or not knowing the actual artwork's history of production allows us to perceive and assess it properly. If there is no perceptual difference between the original and the copy, "perfect" copies may replace the original, which may become superfluous (Jaworski 2013). However, provided that this indiscernibility is empirically possible, there may be significant non-perceptual differences concerning history and context of production, which may be key for appreciating and judging the artwork (Sagoff 1978; Dutton 2003). But if the aesthetic experience of the work is privileged, a good current copy available may be preferred over the old worn original (which is perhaps difficult to access); still, if, even at the risk of being accused of fetishism, the irreplaceability of the specific object forged by the artist is defended, then perceiving any copy, however "perfect," would not amount to experiencing the true artwork. The issue has moral, legal and economic aspects, as well as aesthetic implications: someone who buys a work whose attribution turns out to be false or copied has been scammed, which is legally, economically and morally condemnable. If a moral defect also involves an aesthetic demerit, then the recognition of the counterfeit also affects the item's aesthetic evaluation.

How these questions are answered has important consequences for restoration. This process can be considered an alteration, and therefore a falsification, or conversely the retrieval of the artwork's authenticity (Giombini 2019).

Contemporary art has played with the issue of authenticity and with authentication practices. Paradigmatic are appropriation and ready-made art, which intentionally and openly violate the criteria of genuine authenticity by offering the public the outcome of the "authentic fabrication of an inauthentic work" (Heinich 1999). If works of this kind are intended to be authentic artworks, then genuine authenticity is not a necessary condition of artistic authenticity.

2. *Referential / documentary authenticity.* Referential authenticity concerns the fidelity of representation to reality or the realism of mimesis. It is the ideal of artistic practices such as photography and cinema, able to faithfully document reality by recording and showing observers what the "naked" eye could not grasp. However, in the photographic or cinematic reproduction the referential authenticity of the image is often an effect obtained by resorting to fiction, since in narrating herself the subject in fact re-constructs herself through a representation whose documentary fidelity to the self is the effect of a (voluntary or involuntary) staging (which is not necessarily deceptive). The paradox is that what is represented as authentic is precisely *represented* as authentic. It is exhibited as not exhibited through an exhibition. Genuineness, spontaneity and naturalness are represented through an artificial construction which appears as authentic through the staging of authenticity (Knaller 2012). Referential fidelity of the documentary account provided by the image is related (often in a contrasting way) with subjective choices made by authors while shaping and staging it as they express the experience of (re)living the portrayed events (Arnheim 1993).

3. *Expressive / personal authenticity.* Expressive authenticity concerns the expression of personal experience. An individual is authentic if she shapes her personal experience in a coherent way, is convinced of this self-organization of her personality and expresses it correctly to others and to herself in her behavior and words (Taylor 2003; Von Appen 2013). Hence, in an authentic artistic practice the artist is truthful to her personality, which is expressed in (or through) her art. Conversely, inauthentic is art artists do not make because intrinsically convinced of its value and meaning, but (in the most obvious case) because it promises commercial success. One may object that art is the realm of appearance and fantasy, in which there is no place for sincerity and authenticity of expression: artists are not real people who speak to other people, but personae who cannot be sincere and authentic, having only "aesthetic existence" (Trilling 1971). However, this objection relies on a misunderstanding: expressive authenticity should not be conceived of as a fact, but as the ongoing task of creatively shaping a self (a personality, a style, a voice) through the artwork she makes. Accordingly, art is perceived as authentic when artists remain true to this ongoing task.

4. *Culture / genre / style Authenticity.* This often implies an artist's relationships with a given artistic tradition, movement, genre or style — such as "Rock", "Blues," "Punk," "Impressionism," "Cubism" etc. — towards whose norms the artist can be more or less respectful. This generic or cultural authenticity (that concerns also extra-artistic domains, such as food: Cobb 2014; Strohl 2019) depends on faithfully respecting specific values of communities, traditions or audiences. In particular, artists participate in an artistic community: part of their works' value depends on not betraying the aesthetic/artistic normative bases of their practice that correspond to socio-cultural expectations. However, respect of, and conformity to, generic/stylistic norms and cultural codes are not always aesthetic merits: they can lead to trite imitative repetitions and ridiculous mimics. On the contrary, not only changes, but even the reversal of a cultural tradition can produce excellent artistic results: artistic traditions grow thanks to creative interpretations and appropriations. Cultural appropriation poses a particularly thorny problem (Young 2006). Is it morally permissible and artistically apt to produce art of the genre typical of a certain social group or of a particular people who claim to identify with this artistic genre? (Rudinow 1994) On the one

hand, those who identify with a given artistic genre (or a given gastronomic recipe), defining their cultural identity through that artistic (or gastronomic) expression, can feel robbed of their identity if others take possession of it. On the other hand, the mixing of genres and the appropriation of aesthetic ideas generated and expressed by others have always been important elements of artistic creativity, as well as ways to overcome cultural barriers and to question the rigidity of the definition of cultural identity. The cultural authenticity of a specific artistic phenomenon is often the result of a construction, aimed at selling or propagating the image of authenticity as a means for other purposes and intents (notably commercial) (Taylor 2016).

5. *Performance authenticity (truthfulness to the work)*. This may hold, partly at least, also for performance authenticity, in particular in the musical domain. There are two main kinds of performance authenticity. The first is truthfulness to the musical work. This is achieved when the performance transparently manifests the work by means of score compliance and the fulfillment of composer's intentions, as well as of the conventions of historical musical practices and fidelity to the artistic content of the work. Some think that truthfulness to the work is the condition for the performance's success (Davies 2001). Yet a perfectly transparent performative manifestation of the work would render the performance superfluous. Moreover, the problem arises of how it is possible to use scores, composer's intentions and historical performative conventions (provided they can be epistemically accessed) as well as the musical content of the work as criteria of fidelity of the performance, given that the performance is supposed to interpret the scores, intentions, conventions and work's content. In particular, artistic success of a musical performance does not necessarily require respect of composer's intentions: moral reasons in favor of respect for composer's intentions can be balanced out by other moral reasons, such as respect for listeners (Kivy 1995).

The artistic quality of a musical performance instead requires the second kind of performance authenticity, expressive authenticity (see 3): faithfulness to the performer's own self. Through expressive authenticity, performers achieve style and originality. However, faithfulness to the performer's self is not to be understood as manifestation of the personal nature of the performer, but as the shaping of her personality, to which also her relationship with the work contributes. More generally, musical authenticity seems to be a trade-off: if the rate of authenticity as fidelity to the work increases, that of expressive authenticity diminishes, and vice versa (Kivy 1995).

Some think that improvisation is intrinsically inauthentic because what matters here "is coping with challenges in the moment rather than being true to the work performed" (Dodd 2014, 281). However, others argue, improvisation can be qualified as authentic precisely as true to the moment, i.e. to the performance concrete situation: since this is a requirement of all musical performances, improvisational authenticity is paradigmatic of musical authenticity as such (Bertinetto 2019).

6. *Artistic authenticity as success.* It seems that all the aforementioned kinds of artistic authenticity are aesthetically relevant if they express the artists' commitment to art. Artists are obliged to the artworks they make in the sense that they try to meet their specific requirements, treating each work like something new and unique as though the work were imposing its own authority (Wenninger 2009). Still,

even artistic authenticity, conceived of in terms of the artist's truthful commitment to her project and to the artwork's unique demands, is not a guarantee of artistic success. Instead, success seems to be satisfied by the artwork's power to elicit a transformative experience (Baugh 1994). Yet, whether an artwork is authentic in this sense can only be decided on a case-by-case basis.

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