



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 07, Issue 07, 2018: 31-40

Article Received: 15-03-2018

Accepted: 06-04-2018

Available Online: 14-07-2018

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18533/journal.v7i7.1366>

The Social Dimension of Artistic Objects: An Example Given by the Opera of Luigi Ontani

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ABSTRACT

The epistemic framework of this essay is represented by some of the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Howard Becker. Their perspectives are different but both consider the artist as a cultural producer who works anyway in an artistic field often with reference to the conventions fixed by the art worlds. On the epistemological side, this fundamental conviction represents an attempt of resolution of the contradiction between social structure and agency. According to this point of view, the artistic object is in part the result of collective action and includes therefore a social dimension. This hypothesis is demonstrated by an example given by the opera of the Italian artist Luigi Ontani. This example is also useful to reflect on the relevance of the social dimension acknowledged to contemporary art and artistic objects for the development of social ontology.

Keywords: Art Worlds, Artistic Object, Luigi Ontani, Social Ontology.

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1. Introduction: Research framework

1.1 Background and idea of the study

1.1.1 Epistemological framework and work assumptions

The framework of this paper is represented by some of the works by Pierre Bourdieu and Howard Becker. The authors – while quite different on a theoretical and epistemological level – share the idea that artists are cultural producers who, however, often work in the artistic field and in the context of the conventions established by the art world. This belief is, on the epistemological level, the reframing between agency and social structure.

1.1.2 Uniqueness and importance of the study

From this standpoint follows the assumption that the artistic object incorporates a social dimension, being the result of collective actions oriented toward the realization of the work of art.

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Definition and clarification of this assumption will be followed by the formulation of an example on the work of Luigi Ontani, useful in order to reflect on the importance of the social dimension of art objects, as well as for the development of social ontology.

1.2 Method of analysis and conceptual tools

1.2.1 Method

Let us now consider the method and the conceptual tools used in this essay.

The method of analysis consists in the interpretation of the catalogues and critical monographs devoted to Luigi Ontani's work, together with a few interviews with the author and those who cooperated in his artistic activities. Furthermore, we will undergo a critical analysis of the notions developed by contemporary sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Howard Becker on the theme of the relationship between artist and society. The latter point suggests the heuristic importance of the conceptual tools used for this analysis as actual methodological grids.

1.2.2 Literature and conceptual tools

The main conceptual tools are those of artistic field (Bourdieu 1992) and world of art (Becker 1982). The idea of artistic field draws on the definition of literary world suggested by Pierre Bourdieu in his book *The rules of Art*. According to the French sociologist, the literary field is «[...] a social space where the processes of production and consumption of literature take place and are interpreted by their very protagonists (writers, publishers, booksellers, readers) according to logics inscribed in the same space (hierarchization, distinction, exclusion, co-opting, consecration) (Bourdieu 1992, translated by the author). Generalizing Bourdieu's reflections from novels to the work of art in general, the latter would be the result of mediation between the author's agency and the constraints and opportunities influencing her formation and characterizing the cultural and social context in which she operates. The analysis of aspects concerning the author's culture of reference, paying particular attention to the formation of the discourse intrinsic to a specific type of society, finds major correspondences in Howard Becker's analysis on art worlds (1982) and on the following construction of the artist type. In the author's analysis, art worlds represent the set of subjects and practices that form – by means of appropriate conventions – art objects.

Therefore, in addition to the idea and the concept expressed by the artist, her performing activity, there are also stages such as production, distribution, information and decoding of the artistic message. These phases, within the general layout of Becker's contribution to the sociology of art, turn art works into expression of a collective rather than individual effort. Overcoming the artist's image as the only producer of works of arts does not diminish, however, her character of cultural producer, but rather places it within a framework of practices (the field, according to Bourdieu) that on a theoretical level represents the overcoming of idealism to provide a genuinely sociological perspective (*i.e.* a relational and collective one) on the genealogy of the work of art as a cultural object. It follows that there are different types of artist depending on the positioning of the artist herself in the reference art world.

Becker thus identifies four types, with particular attention to the relationship between the author and her cultural context, the reception of her works and the training guiding the artist's ideas and expressive skills (see Table 1).

Table 1: Artists types identified by Becker.

(1) Integrated professional Preparation and technical training (often academic) Ability to publish and exhibit in official circles Relatively linear achieving of the reputation of integrated artist Ability to work alone or in community	(2) Maverick Preparation and training are often present Difficulties to publish or display in official circles for either style or issues addressed Ability and willingness to propose innovations and criticism of the established system of symbols Laborious achieving of reputation Ability to work alone or in community
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(3) Folk Artist	(4) Naive Artist
Preparation and training unnecessary	Absence of academic training
Activities normally performed outside the professional art world	Difficulties to publish or display in official circles for either style or issues addressed
Ordinary practice carried out as a member of a community	Absence of an explicit critical intention
Tendency to work in community	Laborious achieving of reputation
	Tendency to work alone

Source: Re-elaboration from Becker 1982.

The first type is that of the integrated professional. Its main features agree with the typical established artist profile: she is prepared, has public (often academic) training or exposes in the official circles. In other words, she has the technical and intellectual skills (cultural capital) and moves through organized paths (social capital) that give her reputation as professional artist. The second type is that of the maverick, which is characterized by a critical and provocative attitude towards the official culture, often assisted by a solid artistic training helping input her controversial ideas. When the maverick artist is an integral part of the official culture, she often distances herself from it, giving up the benefits enjoyed by integrated professional (prestige, widespread recognition, ability to publish on the most important official channels) but also freeing herself from the constraints of cultural conformity (to speak and write only on certain topics, watch your language, adhere substantially to the official culture values). The third type is the folk artist, whose technical expertise is neither required by the cultural system nor necessary, since the performances that characterize this category are the expression of the desires and values of a community, which the artist interprets. Finally, there are the naive artists. Those who are characterized by the absence of technical or academic training, the difficulty to publish or display in official circles because of either their style or the issues addressed, by the absence of an explicit critical intention and their tendency to work alone, fall under this category. The solitary lifestyle of those falling within this type often results in labelling practices that render the naive artist as fool or anti-social.

1.2.3 Structure of the manuscript

After explaining the typology introduced by Becker, which will be useful to orient the reflections in the third section, it is now time to introduce the reason of the example of Luigi Ontani in the art world (paragraph 2). In the third paragraph I deal with an example useful for a better understanding of what I consider the social dimension of the artistic objects. In the final section (paragraph 4) are shown the main findings of this general reflection focused on sociology of arts and the (re)construction of the social ontology of artistic objects.

2. Luigi Ontani's work: individual performance and the art world

It may seem at least strange to consider the example of Luigi Ontani (whose personal *modus operandi* is characterized by aspects reminding of the actionist approach and by a strongly narcissistic temperament) to support the assumption of the preponderance of the collective dimension of the artistic object. Actually, the paradox is only apparent, and this appearance is justified precisely in relation to the role of the artist with respect the art world in which it operates.

2.1 A brief note on context

First, we must provide a frame for Ontani's work within the artistic avant-garde art and the development of some of the most significant contemporary art currents. Their historical development, which took place in the late Sixties and along the Seventies, located in cities such as Turin, Rome, Milan and Bologna the ideal setting to express themselves and take root. During this time, on the domestic scene (and beyond) start to affirm themselves, among others, artists such as Michelangelo Pistoletto, Alighiero Boetti and Jannis Kounellis, whose research centres the importance of social issues and historical memory on the poetics expressed by the works. These requirements are emphasized by the use of the simplest materials (such as wood, paper, recovered fabric). The expressive similarities between these figures are quite recurrent, so much so that the critic Germano Celant will bring together the artists in the current he called *Arte Povera*. Similarly, in the late seventies and early

eighties, the role of the critic favours the development of a new trend. It is a multifaceted activity, no longer interested in suggesting reflections or evoking social or political issues, but rather aimed at exalting individual expressiveness through the search for new forms, colours and materials. The critic Achille Bonito Oliva will bring together the work of artists such as Sandro Chia, Enzo Cucchi, Andrea De Maria and Mimmo Paladino in a new movement called *Transavanguardia* (trans-avant-garde). This context is therefore characterized by the development of different expressive styles, by the coexistence between different vanguards, by a more systematic role of critics in guiding and promoting the public image of the artists and in introducing expressive solutions already widely developed abroad. In these years a graduate program specifically dedicated to the themes of art (DAMS) was founded in Bologna. These years also see the empowering of a type of criticism that is not just rhetorical or dispositional but denotes an authorial style consisting in the ability to build a genre (Galasso 2004a). Authors with similar languages are grouped into currents and movements, creating a more recognizable narrative system. Scholars such as Renato Barilli and Francesca Alinovi dedicate their research to contemporary art, in addition to import genres such as street art in the still immature context of the Italian province. Art, and within it the artistic movements, begin to self-represent themselves as societies (Heinich 2001).

2.2 The origins: Ethics and aesthetics of a contemporary dandy

The Seventies are also the years in which Luigi Ontani is beginning to get affirmed on the art scene. Unlike his contemporaries, the artist – born in 1943 in Grizzana Morandi – can not be easily assimilated and ascribed to a current. Indeed, it can not be done at all. His personal style is that of a dandy searching for an individual and methodical canon to place himself, in a contradictory and polished manner, in the art world as well as in the context of the relationships and influences characterizing his inspiration and defining his unique positioning. The sociological sense of dandyism is ascribable to a form of individualism that could be called legislative, i.e. to the individual search for an alternative system of rules considered personally suitable to represent one's distinctive desire rather than following the set of expectations existing in the social context. As I wrote in a previous essay, the human condition of the dandy acts not only on the social context of reference but also on itself, in order to regenerate answers according to the priorities that the very individual attributes himself (Martignani 2013)¹. As Bourdieu argues: «dandyism is not only the will to stand out and to astonish, an ostentation of difference or even the pleasure of displeasing, the concerted intention to disconcert, to scandalize, by voice, gesture, sarcastic pleasantry; it is also and above all a whole ethical and aesthetic posture extended to a culture [...] of the self, that is to say, to the exaltation and the concentration of emotional and intellectual capacities (Bourdieu 1992; tr. En. 1995, 78). On the basis of similar arguments Goffredo Parise defines Luigi Ontani a *para-painter*: «More than any other so-called figurative artist. he personifies the subjective aspects (in his opinion, the objective ones) existing in artistic perception [...] Luigi Ontani is the only one who has the right, the full right, to be called *autre*, magic word of what becomes at the same time a convention» (Parise 1996, 59). In an interview with me, Ontani clarifies the meaning of his dandyism and the ethics underpinning his striving toward personal distinction. Here below a significant excerpt from the conversation:

LM

Because I'm interested not only in your work but in a socio-cultural analysis of you as an artist. You have surely read ... or heard, with respect to the various interpretations of your work ... that you have often been associated with the figure of the dandy ... it is also something funny ... As long as you recognize yourself in it, and after all simplifications are precisely those ways that we use to deal with

¹ According to Giuseppe Scaraffia: «The dandy's widespread attention to the outside world, its care of objects preludes to the end of the false division between subject and object, to the hidden continuity between the self and the world, while seeming to accentuate the gap» (Scaraffia 2007, 100-101). About dandies, also Lanuzza says: «If he is an outsider, he is that for its subtle taste: even dispossessed and without the *homo oeconomicus*' social guarantees. To that he favours his difference, that is critical independence, autonomous opinion, an identity that for sure is not stiff, but still neither altered nor reprehensible» (Lanuzza 1999, 16-17). The core sociological reference (even before Bourdieu and his theory of distinction) is Simmel: «The drive for individual conspicuousness primarily remains content, first, with a mere inversion of social imitation and, secondly, for its part draws its strength again from approximation to a similarly characterized narrow circle» (Simmel 1911; tr. En. 1997, 195).

others ... Do you recognize yourself in it? I mean ... Dandyism is not necessarily a dimension of a snobbish or individualistic personality in a negative sense, but rather the search for a proper normative set, perhaps in contrast with current morals. An aesthetic turn toward what surrounds us ... that is actually implicit in your works and in your words ...

LO

You focused your attention on the dandy aspect, which for me is the recognition that I give to myself – a pleasure to live and to be – that belongs to my childhood [...] Here, it is an unadded mask that belongs to my character ... I mean, is not that I dress and behave in a certain way and from a certain point onward because I change life, it is clear that I'm further stylizing it, as – not by chance – I found the fabric in India [...] [...] If the artist is visually recognizable in his behaviour and actions and in his mask, he is disqualified even if he adopted a language from the start [...] the extremization of the idea of the “professional” disqualified the artist's life if it occurs in stylizations leading to him being recognized as an artist, as it could he be in the show business or other professions ... I mean, we got to this extreme because [...] I initially promoted through self-portrait as a form of physiognomic mask, as I was pleased with and recognized myself in the ambiguity of my late teens ... so this is the first step ... to then move on to the second, the mask as a journey into the world ... and therefore it is an anthropological journey, because before Bali the *commedia dell'arte* held precedence in my physiognomy mask ...

To the cult of individuality, which might lead to superficial analysis and to label Ontani *exclusively* as a narcissistic artist in the mood for frivolity, correspond instead beliefs about the role of art in shaping life, as well as expressive techniques (since the seventies) and forms of collaboration (in particular since the eighties) that strongly reject this very simplistic observation. In the following sections we will see how the artist's cultural influences and collaborations with other members of the art world are translated into a peculiar technique and a solid grounding in the activity of social production of art objects.

2.3 The Seventies: The *tableaux vivants* opposed to the performance

Luigi Ontani imposed himself on the art scene through the creation of *tableaux vivants*, in which the artist's body is the instrument allowing for the merge between identity and some of its symbolic references. Through his body, Ontani gives its own representation of Dante or St. Sebastian, Napoleon or Pinocchio. «In the *tableaux vivants* the artist suppresses the self, or rather projects her own self in the gallery of figures known to us from mythology, literature or figurative art [...] Ontani's eclecticism shows us heroes from art, literature or history» (Weiermair 1996, 12). As we have seen with the *tableaux vivants* (whose representation is opposed to the performance and where creativity and *habitus* are necessarily merged), it is possible to find stylistic influences, collaborations and contents explicitly acknowledged by the artist himself, also with reference to different works. Consider, for example, the physiognomic self-portrait² Ontani creates it to highlight the theme of the mask (developed particularly in India and in Bali) in order reassign substance to the anthropology of the mask, whose symbolic value lies in the origin of the myth, the ritual and the reciprocity of communitarian relations mirrored in the idol³. Since the years of his education in Bologna, we witness the emergence of philosophical and artistic influences behind his activity, which also find practical possibilities of realization and consolidation by means of the institutions and conventions that constitute the field in which the artist is to act⁴. Ontani himself, in an interview at the Quadrennial for Contemporary Art acknowledges some of these influences. He first mentions the places and galleries where he was able to impose his personal style, such as the San Fedele Award (conferred by the Jesuits and then cancelled after 1968), the exhibition opportunities at Palazzo Bentivoglio in Bologna and in the nearby Galleria Franchi 2000. Thanks to such occasions, he was noticed by critics: Gillo Dorfles, Bruno Munari, Renato Barilli and

² See the following link for an interview detailing expressive technique:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YINLQBhCuUw>

³ The main reference is obviously Margaret Mead's and Gregory Bateson's anthropological literature, and even more Claude Lévi-Strauss', particularly the ethnographic diary that is *Tristes Tropiques* (1955).

⁴ Elsewhere Ontani expressly recognized that in addition to literature and philosophy, also comics and opera have been important influences in the construction of his expressive style: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1SIP-WroRRI>

Francesca Alinovi write important words or reviews for him. These elements of his coeval art world define phases such as the distribution and reception of works that, in turn, are consistent with assumption that the artistic object encapsulates an important collective dimension. This dimension also concerns other stages of what could be defined as the art object life cycle, such as its imagination, creation and realization or production.

2.4 Between concept, performance and photography: the suggestions' room

The realization of some of Luigi Ontani's works requires the participation of other parties (similar to performances by Marina Abramovich and Herman Nitsch). Other works are conceived and created with an explicit reference to stylistic elements developed by other artists: a famous example is the installation where the artist covers various daily news pages with a blanket of feathers from a cut pillow (a gesture avowedly recalling Lucio Fontana's *spatial concept*). The early years are also those of the *redundant objects* and the *suggestions' room*, which consists of a creative and exhibition space in which Ontani gives life to his sources of inspiration through the body. According to this logic, the artist expresses a kind of *mimetic desire* that he can endlessly reproduce through actions which repeat a *technology of the self*: the body becomes a pictorial element, able to reproduce some suggestions by condensing them in a confined architectural space. I am talking about suggestions like convenience, emulation, analogy and sympathy: elements that Ontani recognizes in Michael Foucault's crucial work *The Order of Things* (1966), and that – from a sociological perspective – enhance the link between agency and structure as conditioning the artist's work. In Ontani's perspective, Foucault's suggestions build environments (2004b) and represent a *habitus*; a *structuring structure* (Bourdieu 1980) that is, a set of principles generating and organizing artistic practices and representations.

2.5 The eighties and the intensification of collaborations with artisans

In the eighties, Ontani's trips and collaborations are intensified. He focuses on new materials and different forms of expression. The desire to explore photography, ceramics and glass leads him to strengthen his relationships with some workshops, as it happened in Murano and in Faenza, for example with the Gatti Ceramic Art Atelier (Bottega d'Arte Ceramica Gatti). As Peter Weiermair claims: «In the last decade he has established collaboration with many artists craftsmen, artisans of countries he visited, blacksmiths and smelters in Africa, carvers of masks in Bali or photographers in India. He also works with Murano glass blowers, with master potters in Faenza or framers in Rome, who provide him with gold frames in all forms [...] Ontani uses photography. He uses it and applies it. However, he is not a photographer, because there are professional photographers who work for him» (Weiermair 1996, 10-12).

2.6 Today: plurality of forms of expression condensed in the mask and in the logic of the workshop (art and craft bring out the work)

The philosophy supporting Luigi Ontani's artistic production is aimed at overcoming a reproductive serialization the artist himself finds very reductive. From this point of view, the overcoming of the trivialization of every cultural artefact can be achieved. The strategy consists in establishing and strengthening the collaboration between art and craft. Ontani himself, in an interview with me, clarifies the meaning attributed to collaboration between artisan and artist, emphasizing the need to distinguish between the competences of the two figures to give an overall sense of art through the works:

LO

The other aspect – that of partnerships and collaborations – I find important. I had previously expressed the ephemeral side of life with the *tableau vivant* – that recalls the picture without being it, and places it in a desire to be out of time with explicit roots [...] - here ... still a kind of adventure of life placed in an aesthetic space, but ethically it was my life. At the time, I said it many times, the photographers worked in black and white, no one had printed photos that big ... The printer was nearby, in Forlì (the interview was held in Faenza at the Bottega d'Arte Ceramica Gatti) [...] Thus my story and my conviction were born. There was already a collaboration there. When ... I do not actually

“use” photographers, I invite them for friendship and harmony and sympathy to take pictures where I choose the view and the image space and they provide technical quality. Then, when I went around the world, was it Japan, or India, or Bali where I continued [...] There are foreigners who go to learn how to work wood to make a mask [...] That's why through the mask I got back to a sculpture that has as a parameter – not a justification but a signification – totemic aspect and sacrifice. This was my switch to crafts, already in the seventies [...]

LM

Collaborations are essential in your work.

LO

Yes, but not as a return to order [...] Instead of making a sculpture that inherits from the academy, I found myself through the cast to work on identity ... The relationship with workshops, such as here in Faenza, with Gatti, in Murano, well ... it was born through the cast fetish. Professionalism – in my opinion – that is, those who have knowledge and a craft are artisans [...] while many artists have a duty of contemporary conditioning them.

The discourse of the art work (which follows the post-structuralist text + context formula) consists of two distinct skills co-written on the same context (*i.e.* the art world): the artist has the concept; the artisan the professionalism that enables the practical and serial realization of the idea that thus enjoys the possibility of material repetition⁵. These annotations thus support the basic assumption of the present paper. As much as the artist is a cultural producer and Ontani's art can be interpreted as narcissistic on the aesthetic and perceptual level, nevertheless its realization and its reception require a massive intervention by the collective dimension that structures the arts and the art world. In this sense, following Becker's categories, he confirms his position as integrated professional. In confirmation of this consideration (and without any pretence at completeness) Table 2 describes the dynamics of the fields crossing the work of Luigi Ontani.

Table 2: Ontani's world of art and the dynamics of the fields crossing it.

Elements of the world of art (incl. different fields)	Role of these elements in emphasizing the social dimension of the art object
Critics	Eminent art critics (such as Gillo Dorfles, Francesca Alinovi, Renato Barilli and others) have been promoting since 1970 Luigi Ontani's role as an artist, emphasizing his works and approach and defining his entry into the art world as an integrated professional (the artist joins a catalogue, exhibits in collective or personal exhibitions).
Other artists	The artist starts collaborating with other colleagues (such as designer Alessandro Mendini). Other artists explicitly express their appreciation for Ontani (such as Goffredo Parise). For his part, Ontani explicitly acknowledges the influence of styles and approaches represented by artists such as Lucio Fontana, Marina Abramovich and Herman Nitsch.
Scholars	Ontani explicitly acknowledges the influence of some aspects of Michel Foucault's genealogical method, with particular reference to the book <i>The Order of Things</i> , which inspired him to create the room of suggestions.
Travels	Ontani draws from his travels (particularly from destinations such as Bali or India) new suggestions that allow him to develop new techniques of expression.
Politics and public administration (political field in relation with the cultural and artistic field)	The artist's relationship with the Superintendent, the Ministry of Culture and the Departments of culture in some local contexts allow the dissemination (distribution and use) of his works through forms of patronage and sponsorship or representation in museum activities.

⁵ Ontani express this thought in an interview with Achille Bonito Oliva: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4r63_FSINCU

Market (economic field in relation with the cultural and artistic field)	In the artist's perspective relationships with politics remain problematic, or at least not without criticism. Ontani's collaborations extend also to crafts and workshops. Some famous ones are those with the glassmakers' workshops in Murano, or with the Bottega d'Arte Ceramica Gatti (Gatti Ceramic Art Atelier) in Faenza.
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Source: author's re-elaboration from *OntanElegia* (2003).

The following story (which is the main object of the next section) object further strengthens this approach, as well as suggesting new insights on the relationship between social structure and agency in the formation of artistic objects.

3. The episode of the vase

The episode to which this section is dedicated has taken place in 2009 at the Ara Pacis, on the occasion of an exhibition by Alessandro Mendini. The Italian architect and designer had collaborated with Luigi Ontani in the eighties. This collaboration created a line of interesting works (especially ceramic objects) but also some contrasts between the two artists. What happened at the Ara Pacis has been extensively documented by the news. Here, for example, the headline in the *Corriere della Sera*, in an article signed by Edoardo Sassi, April 10, 2009 (translation by the author): «*It is not my vase. And Ontani breaks it into pieces. The act at Mendini's exhibition: Fake. Council member Croppi: now it's a fourhanded work, let's display it*». The article begins with a detailed description of the facts: «He evaded the surveillance of the museum, he grabbed the work of art – in theory a four-handed work signed together with his distinguished colleague – and voluntarily shattered it. Then, swiftly, he took a gold marker (one of his favourite colours) and wrote on the caption label with his name an arrow and the word: *Fake*». Mendini's exhibition included a hundred pots he designed, produced by the firm Alessi. Ontani and other artists had been given the task of decorating them. However Ontani had always denied having made the vase he destroyed, because at the time he was in the East for one of his research trips. The artist also said that the vase had also been put on sale in Bologna, priced as if it were his authentic work, and that he already had it withdrawn at the time. Then the Ara Pacis incident. The vase had all the appearance of having represented for Ontani a negative suggestion, of inauthenticity, if not a real persecution. Interviewed on the fact, Ontani would then release a rather interesting statement for the interpretative purposes of this essay: «But it was not an impulsive gesture, I thought about it all night – he told without regret – that vase is not mine, and that's why I shattered it». A gesture he himself defines: «Drastic, paradoxical, a gesture of ethic intolerance by an exhibitionist aware of the noise it would bring, if only because of the fall». He continues: «And let me tell you, that vase is horrible, they just reproduced one of my oil paintings on a dark background, totally unsuitable. You see, it is not a reproduction on a t-shirt, I would have let it pass. But a museum, with my name exposed. I had to do something, and I did it». Therefore, Ontani's act is only *apparently* rebellious, in fact, it is fully compliant with the rules of the artistic field or – if we adopt Becker's concepts – to the art world in which integrated professionals operate and where politicians seem to be not only foreigners, but also not equipped to understand the logic of the performative act and the meta-economic value of the work itself. On the relationship between art and politics in Italy, Ontani talks in no uncertain terms in a recent interview with me:

LO

Those in power never cared anything about art. I can use parables, as an example: there is an exhibition at the Scuderie del Quirinale, Parmigianino, Correggio, etc ... So I can quibble if the show is more or less beautiful, if it is more or less interesting than it could be ... then I find a wonderful book from many years ago on Parmigianino where it is written that Parmigianino spent a year in jail, because he did not comply with a contract! [...] It is not a thing of the contemporary, that is ... with the wealth, the artistic treasure that is in this country ... society, especially current precarious and consumerist society, has never given importance to art. Then they can tell what they want. They can decide to give me – why not - [...] the Academy Award of San Luca, I said, “Well, if they do not censor me...” but not for a claim to acknowledgement of being transgressive ... This in my opinion is the confirmation [...] of

the fact that there are countries [...] such as France where there is a debate on intellectuality – even a very contradictory one – but there is one [...] returning to other considerations I have expressed in other interviews, it seems to me that some artists in different eras and periods have been able to emerge and to express themselves also thanks to the sympathy of some people. Therefore, even the elite discourse has to be questioned. Elitist in what sense? They are art lovers who may have supported De Pisis, or Morandi, De Chirico or Savinio, rather than others. Even what happened to me, despite my lucky adventure ... it regards some people who believed right away, and others that joined in later ... But the context, let's say official, the State, is never there. And when it is there, it is a socio-political opportunism – I'll be banal – insignificant, reductive, embarrassing ... Here, I'd rather not know them....

In other words, the Ontani's gesture in this episode seems apparently driven by a narcissistic and individualistic temperament, while instead it stresses the normative necessity under which authenticity is an essential requirement for a work to properly circulate in the art world. A symbolic gesture with a conservative spirit, that is, inspired by the need to preserve the forms, which in this case are represented by the normative framework in which the artistic object assumes its shared meaning. But let us consider the tangible consequences of this symbolic gesture. Umberto Broccoli, municipal Superintendent for culture, had initially expressed their intention to denounce the incident. Umberto Croppi, then council member for culture, instead proposed a kind of peaceful mediation: «Now it is a four-handed Mendini-Ontani work, unique. Let us collect the pieces, with the gold-scribbled caption, and display them». The solution proposed by Umberto Croppi was finally accepted by the superintendent and (apparently) also by the two artists involved. The shattered work was displayed, transformed into artistic object by this bizarre collective performative logic. Beyond the temperament of the characters involved, is this not the umpteenth compromise between art and politics?

4. Main findings: Sociology of arts and the (re)construction of social ontology of artistic objects

What does this interesting example of art object for the purpose of reflection on the development of epistemology of the social sciences and the sociology of art in general tell us? First of all, it informs us of overcoming the dichotomy between structure and agency acknowledged by contemporary art and shown through the affirmation of the social dimension of the art objects. This means reflecting once again on the limits of the opposition between objectivism and subjectivism. This reflection has been effectively developed by Pierre Bourdieu, who is also a key author to conduct a sociological analysis that can take account of artistic objects as sources for research and as a subject of analysis. In writing *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972), Pierre Bourdieu shown the limits of both objectivist and phenomenological epistemology, suggesting to overcome both these perspectives through a proposal he defined as a theory of practice. Against objectivism, Bourdieu pointed out that if there are certain social structures that is also because agents internalize certain conditionings reproducing them through their actions. One example is Luigi Ontani's performative act, who, by signing the broken vase, recovers his position as Author (with a capital A) in relation to a controversial and unpleasant case, also because placed in front of an audience forced to associate his name (as an artist) with an artefact he does not recognize as his own work. Against phenomenology, Bourdieu instead criticized the overemphasis on the subjective point of view, stressing that the actions currently implemented by the subjects are conditioned by the *habitus* (1972) and the various dimensions of capital they can employ (economic, cultural and social). The example of the vase is also indicative of this key dimension: there is a context to which we must respond, as a bearer of legitimacy criteria conferring prestige and position of the artist as a cultural producer. After all, we always act within the framework of specific rules that characterize the different fields in which contemporary society is articulated. Many of the reflections here presented find substantial confirmation in the words drawn from a now classic study by Janet Wolff on sociology of art. Let us consider the following quote: «[...] it is a social fact, so to speak, that we have a generic term 'art' which directs us to class together these diverse enterprises and activities, and if only for that reason it is interesting and alluring for the sociologist to investigate what they have in common. More importantly, perhaps, film, literature, painting and rock music can all, in some sense, be seen as repositories of cultural meaning, or, as it is sometimes put, systems of signification [...]» (Wolff 1993, 4). The artist is thus regarded as a cultural

producer (agency dimension) who, however, operates in a context (structure dimension), which affects his stylistic influences and the possibility of receiving, distributing and enjoying his works.

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