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ARTWORK VIRUSES: WHAT VIRUSES TEACH US ABOUT ART

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Synopsis:

Viruses are parasitic marginal existences living in the borders between life and non-life. Likewise artworks are lifeless by themselves, and it only receives life through artists, who serve as the intermediate hosts for artworks. The audience are the definitive hosts, who maintain and spread corresponding artworks. We combine ideas and concepts of philosophy and biology to suggest that artworks are spiritual and ontological existences, which gain life only through living human beings.

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Abstract:

Biologically viruses can be regarded not only as complex aggregations of non-living chemicals, but as simple living systems. Viruses are inert outside living host cells while they are alive and multiply in the host cells they infect. In this sense, viruses are parasitic marginal existences living in the borders between life and non-life. Likewise artworks are lifeless by themselves, and it only receives life through artists, who serve as the intermediate hosts for artworks. The audience are the definitive hosts, who maintain and spread corresponding artworks. For instance, Beethoven's music, which was appreciated only in few European states during his time, receives global attention 180 years after his death. His works have become viral: they have survived time and space (survival), have gone through re-creations (mutation/evolution), and have scattered vastly (reproduction). Virus is the unsurpassed authority on mutation and reproduction in the biosphere, and the creative works of human beings follow the prototype biological tactics of viruses. Accordingly, the term "artwork virus" is not just a rhetorical metaphor. In the present work, we combine ideas and concepts of two seemingly distant disciplines - philosophy and biology - to suggest that artworks are spiritual and ontological existences, which gain life only through living human beings, just as viruses require living hosts to thrive.

Artwork Viruses : What Viruses Teach Us about Art

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I. Introduction



In 2011, the sculpture by the German artist Martin Kippenberger (see the photo above), widely regarded as one of the most talented artists until his death in 1997, was on view at Germany's Ostwall Museum in Dortmund. His work consisted of a wooden structure with a rubber trough painted to look as though it had once contained some dirty rainwater. Kippenberger had spread a layer of paint representing dried rainwater. Unfortunately a janitor mistook the hand-painted patina for simple dirt and scrubbed it away. A spokeswoman for the museum said, "it is now impossible to return it to its original state" adding that it had been on loan to the museum from a private collector and was valued by insurers at \$1.1 million.¹

Until recently, we often encounter with such silly stories. Reasons why these "accidents" happen one after another are as follows: 1) Absence of the artistic insight of citizens. 2) Contemporary artist's using of the ready-made resources rather than the traditional (natural) as materials of works. 3) Preference of an open public over a closed gallery for an exhibition. 4) Mysterious *raison d'être* of artwork, that is to say, the way of being of artwork is too strange to be recognized easily. Among all, this last reason is important in our context.

Art seems to be, but at the same time it seems not to be. Art is what it is and what is not. The *topos* (τόπος; place) of art is located at the ambiguous boundary between being and non-being. Where is the art? What is it? And how is it?; these questions have been fundamental

¹Refer to the following web site. "\$1.1 million sculpture damaged by cleaning woman in German museum" http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/arts-post/post/11-million-sculpture-damaged-by-cleaning-woman-in-german-museum/2011/11/07/gIQAMkmFvM_blog.html and "Overzealous cleaner ruins £690,000 artwork that she thought was dirty" <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/nov/03/overzealous-cleaner-ruins-artwork>

problems handed down in the history of aesthetics. It is not an exaggeration to say that the history of aesthetics was the arena to seek the best solution for these problems. If so, where is the art? Does it indeed exist in everything? Even in trash?

Viruses could help us to understand the work of art better. Let's listen to what viruses teach us about art. Some readers might feel discomfort in trying to compare humble things (viruses) to the best products of the human mind (artworks). In spite of the potential discomfort, we will use 'artwork viruses' as the central metaphor, because this metaphor can help us to elucidate the specificity of the artwork philosophically. Normally, "metaphors we live by"² should meet two conditions. One is the 'novelty' (not cliché), the other is the 'significance' (not nonsense) created despite the juxtaposition of unfitting words. The freshness of our metaphor might be derived from a finding of similarity between the highest and lowest species (human vs. virus) of the biosphere. Now let's take a look at the significances of this metaphor.

II. The specificity of viruses

Biologically viruses can be regarded not only as complex aggregations of non-living chemicals, but as the simplest living systems. Viruses are inert outside living host cells while they live and multiply in the host cells they infect. In this sense, viruses are parasitic marginal existences living in the borders between life and non-life. The specificity of viruses is the parasitism depending on the other absolutely.

Viruses have a parasitic lifestyle. They neither react to external stimuli nor replicate themselves until they meet a host. If such viruses meet a host, they suddenly change their appearance like an organism. While they succeed in parasitizing a host, they replicate repeatedly and extend their presence. So they infect quickly a lot of hosts near the first infected. Like a ghost that haunts across time and space, viruses are lurk anywhere the host exists. Only through parasitizing hosts, they reveal their capabilities.

What is at the boundary is something far distant from the center. It is like a stranger strolling on the state border. Thus, it is the unassigned and unidentified, which is excluded from the epistemological taxonomy. Virus is such a thing. It is a being which is either life or non-life. At the same time, it is neither life nor non-life. In other words, it cannot be assigned clearly to any class. It has a way of being that can traverse between being and non-being, like a ghost (etymologically derived from the German word, Geist).

As mentioned above, these features are true of art too. Now what we should notice is this decisive similarity found between virus and art. In order to elucidate the secret being of art, we introduce two German philosophers, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). On the one hand, both of them articulated the essence of art philosophically, and the other hand, they had a deep interest in the relationship between art and science.

III. Art as Ghost and Being

Dilthey understood that the artwork is a kind of "spirit (Geist: ghost)."³ According to

²George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press; 2nd edition, 2008. especially cf. *ch. 21 New Meaning*.

³Dilthey, Wilhelm, "Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften", *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd., VII, Stuttgart, 1973. pp. 214-225. We can refer to following works in relation to art or spirit; *Das Erlebnis*

him, spirit is a peculiar property of the finite human being, i.e. of historical life. And the artwork is nothing else but an expression of this spirit. In contrast to Dilthey, Heidegger grasps the artwork with his technical term, "Being (Sein)." Being is historical and reveals itself only through finite human being (Dasein). The artwork is a place where Being uncovers itself. And it gets necessarily involved with human beings in terms of Being. Therefore there are no artworks, without the medium of human being.

Dilthey will also agree with Heidegger in this point. The artwork is neither a thing nor a tool, but an expression of spiritual experience. The appreciation (preservation) of artwork is a process of re-experiencing an expressed spirit in the artwork. According to Dilthey, there is an artwork only in the circulation of experience, expression, and understanding. And both "spirit" of Dilthey and "Being" of Heidegger have an analogical mode of being. Summarizing the ontological singularity of the artwork, which we extracted from art-philosophy of Dilthey and Heidegger, the artwork is

- 1) Between-Being, deviating from the dichotomy (for example, necessity and freedom), which traditional philosophy has made.
- 2) The artwork can be only in connection with human being.
- 3) The artwork is not a physical thing, but it has a self-creating mode of being, which has been transforming itself in history.

IV. What is art?

The human gaze is in its own nature conservative. Habit is the second nature of human being. Human sensibility and thinking apparently obey the law of inertia. That is to say, they are not fond of the new and unfamiliar, but tend to maintain the existing trajectory, for they seek economic efficiency and stability. The unshackling from this conservative tendency of the gaze demands exterior magnetic forces, and art is this explosive charm.

Art seduces the viewer to a new world. It seems infectious.⁴ This does not mean that an artwork offers one something he/she has never seen. Rather, art enables one to see the concrete that one has been seeing all along anew by transfiguring one's eye. A work of art guides one to another world constructed within it, and this is the charm of art; figuratively speaking, like the rabbit-hole in *Alice in Wonderland*. Art is a black hole that pulls one right through into a "Wonderland". This is what Heidegger argued about art, that is, "the setting into the works in relation to the truth" (das Ins-Werk-Setzen der Wahrheit)⁵. The art in itself is nothing but a non-living thing. Only through Dasein, art can be there as a hole that sucks one

und die Dichtung: Lessing . Goethe . Novalis . Hölderlin, 15. Auflage, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1970. "Die Geistige Welt: Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens, zweite Hälfte Abhandlungen zur Poetik, Ethik und Pädagogik", *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd., VI, Stuttgart, 1978. "Weltanschauungslehre - Abhandlungen zur Philosophie der Philosophie", *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd., VIII, Stuttgart, 1977.

⁴In his book, *Ion*, Plato has described the forces of art with a magnet-metaphor. "The gift which you possess of speaking excellently about Homer is not an art, but, as I was just saying, an inspiration; there is a divinity moving you, like that contained in the stone which Euripides calls a magnet, but which is commonly known as the stone of Heraclea. This stone not only attracts iron rings, but also imparts to them a similar power of attracting other rings; and sometimes you may see a number of pieces of iron and rings suspended from one another so as to form quite a long chain : and all of them derive their power of suspension from the original stone. In like manner the Muse first of all inspires men herself; and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended, who take the inspiration." Plato, "ION," in *Platon*, Bd. I, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1977. 533d. ff.

⁵M. Heidegger, *Holzwege*, GA5, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1977. p. 44.

into the another world. In this sense, a work of art is similar to viruses which can transfer genes across species boundaries, that is, into the another genetic world (of the sedimentary memory).

If artists are infected with artwork viruses for the first time, viewers are people infected with artwork viruses through the artist. At the same time, viewers are also a host to preserve and maintain the life of viruses. It is not a mere coincidence that Heidegger designated viewer as the preserver (Bewahrende) of art.⁶ Artwork needs to preserve itself. In this case, the preservation does not only mean the conservation of the physical work, such as a vacuum embalming. Rather it means a preserving in the memory of viewers. This memory lets something be done with an artwork.

Beholders are enthralled with the strong impact of artwork. And this shock pushes one into an unfamiliar world. The shock of an artwork to beholders is fascinating rather than violent. And beholders are immersed in it, as if they are sucked into a black hole. A work of art might be able to change a fixed gaze through the emergence of a fascinating power, so that it could take a look at the abundant Being.

But there must be both an artist and a viewer in order for the work of art to exist. In other words, if there can be the work of art, it must meet both artist and viewer who can receive it or give themselves as a kind of host. The way of being of artwork is like viruses. It needs at least a single human being as host. We can encounter another world through the medium of artwork. If so, the relation between artwork and human being, about which Heidegger argued, could be called a 'symbiotic' one, because both host and parasites acquire benefits.

V. The limits of Meme-theory

In the era of natural sciences, Dilthey and Heidegger were philosophers who attempted to reestablish a rigid basis of the Humanities. Dilthey thought that if we have only blunt methods of natural science, it is inevitable to miss the delicate and subtle parts of the "spirit" that permeate artificial products of human history. For example, if someone explains Beethoven's music in terms of a specific type of frequency combinations or tries to analyze our feeling by measuring levels and distribution of neurotransmitters and their receptors in our body, our enthusiasm for that music will disappear immediately. The world of "spirit (Geist)" is moving according to the law of human being, constituting natural laws actively. This world transcends the limits of natural laws. Dilthey and Heidegger are philosophers who tried to consilience between the humanities and natural sciences as early as a century ago. There were similar achievements in natural sciences too. Among them, Richard Dawkins would be the most famous. He explained many cultural phenomena with terminologies of biology. He is certainly the precursor of our interdisciplinary study. Regrettably, however, there seems to be some limits of his theory.

Dawkins proposed to us the "meme", which can elucidate the transmission-mechanism of cultures on the basis of Darwin's theory of evolution and modern genetic discourse. Meme is a concept inspired in biological gene as a self-replicator, which is introduced to explain the cultural traditions that were developed in non-genetic ways. In short, it is a cultural pseudo-gene. Dawkins as a Darwinian was not satisfied with the general evolutionary explanation of life through gene and tried to expand into the cultural theory. He explains it as follows.

⁶M. Heidegger, *Ibid*, p. 54 ff.

We need a name for the new replicator, an noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. ‘Mimeme’ comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ‘gene’. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme.⁷

Dawkins suggests that it can be used to describe the transmission of culture, like self-replication of gene. Imitation is important in culture. Imitation is the basic principle of culture-transmission. In this sense, culture is a product of imitation, and imitation is a reproducing mechanism of meme, which is a new self-replicator and a unit of imitation. Through the imitation of meme, human culture is spread horizontally and transmitted vertically. In this context, meme is a substance that is capable of transmitting from one brain to another. According to Dawkins, memes have three peculiar characters like genes; longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity.⁸ Examples of memes are tunes, songs, ideas, catch-phrases, fashions, skill, religion (God) etc. Dawkins seemed to think that Darwinian theory is well compensated for by his meme theory. By the way, he concluded with the unpredictable remark in the chapter to discuss memes.

We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators.⁹

Seemingly, Dawkins put a distance from scientists who support a genetic determinism. “As an enthusiastic Darwinian, I have been dissatisfied with explanations that my fellow-enthusiasts have offered for human behaviour. ... I think Darwinism is too big a theory to be confined to the narrow context of the gene.”¹⁰ However, Dawkins could not escape completely from such charges by introducing a meme-theory, because we (human) remain still mere ‘machines’ in his view, even though he intensified his efforts to wipe out misunderstanding about himself. He could not explain how we can rebel against selfish replicators, especially against memes, because we are only copying machines, not creative antagonists rebelling against all kinds of copy.

Now it is indispensable to mention briefly, but carefully, the limits of meme-theory because it has many things in common with our (artwork virus) theory. First, it is not an innovative idea, but an old fashioned one. The great idea about art i.e. one of the highest cultural things, has been mimesis (μίμησις) more than 2,500 years ago. And Plato argued already in his book, *Symposium*, the two ways toward immortality; one is the bodily reproduction by sex, the other is the cultural production by love between souls. Second, his theory failed to secure the artist’s creativity and otherness, because he saw only the imitation of meme. Therefore his idea about replicators forced him unable to reveal mystery of creativity and origin of power rebelling against all kinds of replicators. Finally, he substantialized the principle of culture as a unit of imitation. But we think, art (a core of culture) can not be substantialized at all. If so, it would have been able to be defined. And it would have been lost its life (creativity). That is the reason why we noticed the lifestyle (at the boundary of being and non-being) of viruses.

⁷Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, 30th anniversary edition 2006. p. 192.

⁸Richard Dawkins, *Ibid*, p. 194

⁹Richard Dawkins, *Ibid*, p. 201.

¹⁰Richard Dawkins, *Ibid*, p. 191.

VI. Conclusion

It has already been recognized by some philosophers that the work of art has a specific way of a boundary (between) being, that is to say, it does not neatly belong to anywhere, just like a virus. For example, Plato considered the work of art to be a result of love (Ἔρως) between sensual and intellectual world.¹¹ And Kant regarded the kingdom of beauty (or aesthetic region) as the boundary zone of the abyss between the theory (necessary law) and practice (freedom) area.¹² Both philosophers placed the work of art and beauty in the border that divided the two worlds and at the same time made them link together. In conclusion, our critical argument can be summarized as follows: the work of art does not exist as fixed objects, but as ghostly beings, existing only through the historic encounter with the living human being, like viruses survive among susceptible hosts.

Artworks are lifeless by themselves like viruses, and it only receives life through artists, and hosts. The artists (intermediate hosts) are also carriers, and the audience (definitive hosts) are the infected, who maintain and spread artworks. For instance, Beethoven's music, which was appreciated only in a small number of European states during his time, receives global attention 180 years after his death. His works have become viral: they have survived time and space (survival), have gone through re-creations (mutation/evolution), and have scattered vastly (reproduction).

Virus is the unsurpassed authority on mutation and reproduction in the biosphere, and the creative works of human beings follow biological tactics of viruses. Thus, the term "artwork virus" is not just a rhetorical metaphor. In the present work, we combine ideas and concepts of two seemingly distant disciplines - philosophy and biology - to suggest that artworks are spiritual and ontological existences, which gain life only through living human beings, just as viruses require living hosts to thrive.

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¹¹Platon, "Das Gastmahl," In: *Platon*, BdIII, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1974. 202a ff.

¹²I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Philosophische Bibliothek Bd. 39a. hrsg. von Karl Vorländer, Hamburg : Felix Meiner, 1974. cf. Introduction and "Erste Einleitung in die Kritik der Urteilskraft," In: *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. XX, hrsg. von der Königlich Preußischen Academie der Wissenschaften, Berlin : Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1942.

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