

The Unimportance of the Avant Garde

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§ 1. *Avant Garde Art and Aesthetic Theories of Art*

Is avant garde art of special importance in the philosophy of art?¹ Of course, *some* avant garde art may be intrinsically interesting. Perhaps philosophers can reflect on the meaning and value of those works. Some of these works may even raise philosophical issues. However, many philosophers have followed Arthur Danto in thinking that there are quite general morals to be drawn from these works.² They think that avant garde art should play a special role in general theorizing about the nature of art. On the basis of these sort of examples, Danto has been influential in persuading many philosophers of art, particularly in the United States, to approach the philosophy of art in a particular way — a way that emphasizes the social and artistic context of art and one that turns away from the aesthetic ambitions of the individual artist in making a work. But in fact, we shall see that the examples are no support at all for this theoretical shift. We can hold fast to more old-fashioned aesthetic theories of art, which, since the 1960s, have remained quite popular in the UK, while going out of fashion in the USA. In the UK, aestheticians have been less over-whelmed by the idea that avant garde art has this general importance. There is a cross-Atlantic difference on this issue. I am not sure what the situation is in Europe, and elsewhere in the world. I often sympathise with American attitudes to philosophy. But in aesthetics, my sympathies are with the British. I think that the role accorded to avant garde art is overblown; and I think that aesthetic theories of art have little to fear from such phenomena.

§ 2. *Art and Indiscernible Duplicates*

Why do Danto and other aestheticians think that avant garde art is philosophically important?

Danto thinks that the philosophical content of this art lies in the lesson that examples of indiscernible duplicates teach. These are examples of imaginary or real pairs of things that are intrinsically indiscernible, yet one of them is art while the other is not. Such examples have been influential in getting philosophers to embrace artworld or institutional theories, or theories of that general sort. But what exactly do examples of indiscernible duplicates show? What they show is that being art is a *relational* property. But that leaves open a vast range of theories. In particular it leaves open Monroe Beardsley's aesthetic theory of art.³ Danto and his followers infer that their preferred kind of relational theory is encouraged. But this is surely a clear non-sequitur.⁴

Some examples of indiscernible duplicates might not only show that being a work of art is relational but also that the relevant relation is an essential origin of some kind. Thus a piece of 'swamp

¹ I use 'avant garde' in a broad sense so that it includes the artistic movements of the 1920s and 1930s that thought of themselves under that label. Thus avant garde art includes the ready-mades of the early Twentieth Century; but I also use it to include pop art and conceptual art of the 1960 and onwards.

² Arthur Danto, "The Artworld", *Journal of Philosophy*, 1964; *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981; *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986; *Beyond the Brillo Box*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992; *The Abuse of Beauty*, Chicago: Open Court, 2003.

³ For the fullest statement of Beardsley's theory of art see his "An Aesthetic Definition of Art", in Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen (eds.) *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, Oxford Blackwell, 2004.

⁴ Whoever thought that being art was an intrinsic property anyway?

art', which is just like some artwork except that it came into existence after lightning struck a swamp, is not art, despite its similarity to things that are art. This is because it has the wrong origins. That works of art have essential origins falls out of the fact that they are *artifacts*. Swamp tables are not tables for the same reason. Artifacts have essential origins in thoughts. The possibility of cases of indiscernible duplicates involving works of art follows from the artifactuality of artworks.

There are also indiscernible duplicates examples of two things that are different artworks. Earnst Gombrich explored this in 1959 in his book *Art and Illusion*.⁵ Here Gombrich makes explicit the anti-formalist stance that was implicit in the title of his 1950 multi-million-selling book *The Story of Art*.⁶ Perhaps a relational theory of art is not very controversial, and it seems not too controversial to say that works of art have essential origins in artistic actions. But to say that they also have essential relations to other works of art is much more controversial. It is true that many works of art do have such essential relational properties; but it is plausible that some and perhaps many do not. Their identity does not depend on relations to other works. It is also plausible that there *must* be some cases where art identity is not relational in this way if there is anything for the story of art to be the story of. Granted: there are some works of art that depend on other works of art. But there can only be those works of art because there are other works of art that do not.

Thus I doubt that examples of indiscernible duplicates have much to teach us. They should not play the pivotal role in general theorizing about the nature of art that Danto envisages.

§ 3. 'Defining' Art

There is often said to be a project called *defining art*, and this is consecrated in aesthetics anthologies and textbooks. This project usually seems to involve the search for 'necessary and sufficient conditions' for being art. Avant garde art enters the stage as a candidate counterexample to certain theories. The somewhat Hegelian picture that Danto urges us to accept is that theories of art attempt to describe art, but meanwhile art itself moves on and refutes the theories. The theories of art are pitched at something moving and changing and tend to describe art as it was but is no more.

This project of 'definition' is usually thought of as giving the meaning of the word or concept "art". But it is in fact odd that this is pursued by seeking 'necessary and sufficient conditions' for being a work of art. For giving necessary and sufficient conditions for being X (a modal equivalence) is not the same as giving the meaning of "X" (a semantic equivalence). Water is necessary and sufficient for being H₂O, but there is no equivalence of meaning between "water" and "H₂O". Actually, the project of 'defining art' is clearly not coherent; the phrase "defining art" is not well-formed. One can define "art" but not art itself. Are those who seek a 'definition' really in search of what is sometimes called a 'real definition', which is not a matter of meanings? I suspect that practitioners of conceptual analysis in the philosophy of art have not made up their minds.

Suppose that the project that is being pursued is the analysis of the concept of art, and this concept is assumed to apply to painting, sculpture, architecture, literature and music. Then at least the following four issues arise, which caution us either about the feasibility of conceptual analysis or about its fruits

⁵ Earnst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, London: Phaidon, 1959, p. 313.

⁶ Earnst Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, London: Phaidon, 1950.

even if successfully pursued. (1) The project assumes that there *is* a concept of art that it is in good order and that awaits analysis. Taking thesis and counterexample to be the central method of conceptual analysis in the philosophy of art only makes sense if there is something stable and robust to analyse. But it is not obvious that we had such a notion before we started studying philosophy. Some but not all English dictionaries list such a meaning. (In German, *kunst* might correspond to the word “art” as used in Philosophy, but many other languages lack such a word.) (2) There may be quite a few concepts of art that we might analyse. But if there are competing notions, it raises the question of which we *ought* to deploy. In Renaissance Europe and in Japan, for example, there are radically different categorizations that apply to very different things. Perhaps we should think like them. (3) The fact that we have a certain concept, even if it is universally shared, does not mean that it succeeds in picking out a range of objects that share a common nature. It may or may not do so. We are primarily interested in the world, and what the concept picks out.⁷ Not all concepts are equally satisfactory. We need concepts that do justice to the world. (4) Even if there is a concept of art that is in good order and that does pick out a range of things that share a common nature, it is not clear that rational explanatory issues can be addressed given only a grasp of the concept of art. There would be a lot left to do to understand art and art-activities even after the conceptual analysis had been successfully done. For at least these four reasons, conceptual analysis is not a satisfactory approach to philosophical reflection on art. Either it makes questionable assumptions or else it is too limited.

But if we are not overly interested in the concept of art, or we are wary of engaging in ‘analysing’ that concept, then the concern with counterexamples is no longer paramount. The project of conceptual analysis in the philosophy of art usually consists in the search for necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be art. Hence the search for counterexamples — something that is art but fails to fit the definition, or something that fits the definition but is not art. But with a different methodology, counterexamples need not take centre stage. This is why deploying the avant garde as a source of putative counterexamples to aesthetic theories of art makes questionable assumptions about fundamental issues of methodology in the philosophy of art.

§ 4. *Explanation*

We need to ask the meta-question: how should we assess theories of art? What criteria of adequacy should we deploy? The entire method of definition and counterexample is questionable. The project of conceptual analysis and the search for extensional adequacy is vulnerable to a meta-criticism. Even if a theory were good by those lights, it might be uninteresting and illuminating. In place of an extensional criterion of adequacy, I propose an explanatory criterion of adequacy. We want explanation: we need to explain the consumption and production of art, and perhaps also the sustenance of works of art. These are very broadly the three things we do with art. And they are puzzling. Why do we bother with art? The philosophy of art should address these questions. If it does not, it risks being flawed or superficial.

The explanation we seek is *rational* explanation, or it involves rational explanation. We need an explanation of why art appears to us to be worth making, preserving and using. What do people see in

⁷ Compare Hilary Kornblith, *Knowledge and Its Place in Nature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, especially chapter 1.

it? This does not imply that all works of art have value. George Dickie unfairly thinks that an evaluative definition implies that there is no bad art.⁸ This is beside the point. What is important is that many works of art seem to people to be of value. Bad art is presumably not typically thought bad by its makers. In the *Republic*, Plato interestingly gave an explanation of why some of what we call art *seems* to be of value, but it is not. This is right kind of theory.

Some say that the theory of art can be a metaphysical theory that is neutral about evaluational matters.⁹ Two separate theories are thus envisaged: a value-neutral theory of art, and a theory of its evaluation. The idea is that the theory of art might fit under some broader theory of evaluation, but it need not itself supply that broader evaluation. But this is not feasible. There could only be such a value-neutral theory of art if art were a natural kind like gold. But works of art are human artifacts with purposes that derive from intentions. And artifacts are not understood until we find them intelligible — that is, until we see how it would be rational to make and use them. To understand an artifact is to understand why someone might want to make it and use it. Either a theory of art should itself provide this explanation or else it provides the basis for such an explanation. It can not be a separate or completely unrelated story. The theory of art must be subsumed under a general rational explanatory story. Views about the nature of art should be a by-product of a good rational explanatory story.

Others say that if we want to explain human art-activities, we should bring to bear empirical psychology or empirical sociology. But I think that there are dangers lurking down this path. For we need a theory that explains various attitudes that we have and activities that we engage in by making them intelligible or by showing how they seem worthwhile to those who have them or engage in them. We need a theory that prioritizes the first person point of view — a theory that invokes the reasons that a person has, not just causes. So the kind of explanation we need as a priority is *rational causal* explanation. Other explanations of our actions should, in most cases, respect our own self-understanding of our actions, not replace it. There are of course some areas where our self-understanding is delusory, but this is not generally the case.¹⁰ This is not to rule out the possibility of empirical psychological studies of art or of an empirical sociology of art. But such empirical enquiries must respect our own self-conception, either by vindicating it, or by going beyond it and building on it. Psychological studies of art or the sociology of art without a sound philosophy of art — one that emphasizes the first-person point of view — are likely to be inconclusive at best, and irrelevant at worst.

We need to understand the world, including ourselves, and we need concepts that allow us to do that. Our concept of 'art' is not sacrosanct. The question is not: what is our concept of art? But: which concept or concepts *should* we have? If a proposed theory involves reforming ordinary common concepts to a greater or lesser extent, then so be it; that is something we may need to do for an explanatory gain. We want an explanatory theory of our mental life as far as it involves works of art.

⁸ George Dickie, *Art and Value*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, chapter 6

⁹ Stephen Davies 2003: "Essential Distinctions for Art Theorists", in Stephen Davies and Anata ch. Sukla (eds.) *Art and Essence*, London: Praeger.

¹⁰ In general, I think that the mental causes of our actions are usually transparent to agents. Here I am probably on Hegel's side against Marx and Freud. We have considerable self-understanding of the source of our actions; for the most part, we know why we act as we do. See further Nick Zangwill, "Perpetrator Motivation: Some Reflections on the Browning/Goldhagen Debate", in Eve Garrard and Geoffrey Scarre (eds.), *Moral Philosophy and the Holocaust*, Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2003.

And we should fashion concepts that allow us to attain that.

§ 5. *The Value of the Avant Garde*

Let us now return to avant garde art. Such art is controversial. Indeed it is often supposed to be controversial. In particular its value is controversial. Many people think that avant garde art does not have much value. For example, the popular anti-art-establishment art critic Brian Sewell thinks that these works are by and large not worth producing, conserving or consuming.¹¹ So, given the rational-explanatory aim of a theory of art, it is surely not a good idea to make such works the centrepiece of one's philosophy of art. This leads to the opposite approach from that many contemporary writers — the conservative position that the priority is to explain central uncontroversial cases of valuable art. How about focusing on Uccello and Cranach rather than Duchamp and Warhol?

So when aestheticians object to aesthetic theories of art on extensional grounds, asking “What about such and such works of art that do not have aesthetic ambitions?”, the reply is that we are not playing the extensional game but the explanatory game. We can concede that an aesthetic theory does not fit this or that case. Why is that so disastrous? The aesthetic theory gives the essence of a great many works of art. It tells us what they are, and it yields an explanation of the value of these works and of the value of our art-activities. That is interesting. Whether there are some other phenomena that are not explained in this way does not detract from the successful explanation of the many cases with which it deals.

We need a theory of art that explains the *apparent* value of most works of art. Someone might, following Plato, maintain the radical thesis that the value of most central cases is merely apparent and not real. But that appearance still needs to be explained. By contrast, where the value of art is widely disputed — as the value of avant garde art is disputed — there is no general appearance of value to be explained. These works differ from mainstream works in that there is no general acceptance of their apparent value. Of course tastes differ; people value mainstream works differently. But we must think that, quite generally, it is not irrational to make and experience most art. By contrast, this is exactly what many people do think of much avant garde art. Hence it is a mistake to make such cases central in the theory of art.

§ 6. *Aesthetic Theories and Rational Explanation*

A theory of art needs to explain our art-attitudes and art-activities. It should explain the value that people see in making, sustaining and perceiving works of art. Aesthetic theories of art have a great advantage over theories that privilege ideological or cognitive or emotional purposes for art. For aesthetic theories appeal to *pleasure*; and the desire and pursuit of pleasure is familiar and understandable. The kind of pleasure that aesthetic theories appeal to is likely to be a special kind of pleasure, a pleasure with greater value than more pedestrian kinds of pleasure. Nevertheless, it is pleasure. And the pursuit of pleasure is an intelligible and rational pastime.¹² If aesthetic theories appeal to pleasure, they can provide, or are

¹¹ Brian Sewell, *An Alphabet of Villains*, London: Bloomsbury, 1995.

¹² One speculation about why people are suspicious of aesthetic theories of art is that it arises from a Puritanism that frowns on pleasure. Many think that art would be more worthwhile if it provides knowledge or moral uplift or political progress rather than superficial or decadent feelings of pleasure! An example is Nelson Goodman's

easily conjoined with, a particularly compelling explanation of the appearance of value of artworks and of our art-activities. Hence aesthetic theories of art give us a rational explanation of the great majority of art and art-activities throughout the world in the last few millennia. This is surely more important than whether a theory can capture a handful of experimental works made in New York in the 1960s.