

The Academic Synopticon

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Part Eleven.

From Aesthetics to Art Criticism

1. Introduction

Philosophy of art has been suspicious of the “aesthetic” for a long time. Inadequate theories of art have had poor notions of the aesthetic. A theory can gain undeserved plausibility by first distorting the subject matter. Some theories of art say that the aesthetic lies in intently immediate perception; other theories say the aesthetic arises in detached thoughtful observation; still others find the aesthetic in pure speculative imagination. Different theories find the aesthetic culminating in image stimulation, or emotional arousal, or meaningful signs, or even propositional statements. Surely aesthetics can involve any of these things, but must one or another be the essential factor which must dominate the aesthetic?

All theories of art agree that sensory observation is involved but insufficient for the aesthetic. Art must be directly encountered in perception, but that is not enough to arouse aesthetics. Intellectual capacities of imagination, memory, and recognition are at minimum involved too, so that aesthetics involves meaning for the viewer. So far, agreement is easy, and from here so many theories of art proceed to diverge. But precisely defining the aesthetic seems hopeless, since so many specific definitions are easily refutable. For example, aesthetics cannot require beauty, since much art is ugly; other standards and definitions of aesthetics have fallen everywhere, as all manner of art has been produced.

As specific aesthetic standards are challenged by novel art, art criticism has one by one declared them irrelevant to art. With no aesthetic standards left, the only way to even know whether something is art is to know a great many facts about the artist, art history, the artworld, and art criticism. Recognizing art and evaluating art now seems to many art critics and philosophers as an almost entirely intellectual enterprises. Conveniently making their own intellectual work absolutely essential to art, the importance of actually experiencing art receded to the vanishing point.

Longstanding frustration over locating and defining the aesthetic combined with growing disdain for merely experiencing art. The intellectualists dominated the 20th century discussion of art. For art criticism, great art consisted of art that met the critics’ preset expectations for the stages of art’s necessary evolution. Some innovative philosophers of art confessed surprise at radical steps; few art critics could admit as much since they were already committed to one theory or another.

We now hear a chorus of consensus that art and aesthetics have little or nothing to do with each other. One inconvenient fact remains: actually encountering a work of art is still necessary. Judgments upon art all involve experiences of art and the meanings arising within that experience. That’s why the notion of the “aesthetic” simply won’t go away – some sort of term for denoting those meaningful encounters with art remains absolutely necessary. Throw away that term “aesthetic” if you want, but it keeps coming back. Substitute some other term, and that term will still mean more or less what “aesthetic” is supposed to basically mean. Theory must always return to its proper subject matter. Rather than permitting theories of art criticism to dictate the utility or uselessness of the “aesthetic”, let’s try to prevent theory from prematurely distorting its subject matter. The aesthetic is still worth discussing first.

If the aesthetic is anywhere, it is at least in our experience. In between the aesthetic experience (hereafter the AE) and art criticism lies the artwork. Art criticism passes judgments (interpretative and value judgments), but not upon AEs directly. My enjoyment of a familiar sound or a pleasant sight cannot be criticized, by itself. A criticism at minimum involves a comparison between two known things in some selected respect. An AE taken in isolation suggests nothing else for comparison, and a critical judgment throwing that AE into some sort of comparison with another other arbitrary thing is impertinent and presumptuous. Your AE of a Tuscan piazza and my AE of a Tuscan pizza simply are what they are. How can criticism even get started here in our experiences, at the very place where everything aesthetic begins?

2. What is Aesthetic?

What could the enjoyments of a beautiful public piazza and a deliciously edible pizza have in common? What feature do they share, that some standard might be used to compare them in some selected respect? How can they be gathered together under such a made-up term as “aesthetic experience”? Enjoyments of piazzas and pizzas can both be paradigmatic examples of AEs, as few could deny. That’s the practical everyday work that the term “aesthetic” is supposed to do, after all. We appreciate AEs. Or rather, AEs are precisely those experiences of appreciation. Art at the very least aims to arouse appreciation for experiences of it. The ‘appreciation’ in an AE must be understood in a very broad sense, broad enough to encompass the way that some people appreciate a frighteningly disgusting display of ugly brutality (they pay money to see a horror film, as one example). Many people enjoy horror films, of course, and appreciate them greatly. But you can appreciate a horror film without enjoying a single minute of it. Indeed, we can imagine a film critic rating a horror film very highly in its genre precisely because he found it thoroughly unenjoyable. Similarly, people can appreciate the exotic flavors of a foreign cuisine even while admitting that it tastes awful to them, and people can appreciate the awesome spectacle of an approaching tornado even while hoping to never see one again. In the same manner people are quite capable of recognizing something as a work of art, and capable of appreciating this work of art, even while they do not have any enjoyable experiences of it. We should therefore not equate the aesthetic with the enjoyable, as if only positive pleasant feelings are implied. However, appreciation for an AE seems vitally necessary to it, provided that “appreciation” is not taken in its narrow senses of positive enjoyment or approved value.

What all these experiences, pleasant and unpleasant, have in common at root is the way that they arouse some degree of attentive appreciation as unique unified experiences. AEs are special and eventful experiences; they stand out, either in the moment or upon subsequent reflection. The aesthetic could be in the pretty wrapping paper or the view from a tall mountain peak. We might say, “that’s really nice” or we might say, “Now THAT was an experience!” These notable experiences, from the fleeting to the fascinating to the momentous, all draw some attention, they focus attention by offering a unified process of experience, and they culminate in an arousal of some appreciation for that whole event. AEs are at least minimally interesting and appreciated in themselves. AEs may well lead on to other things; they can trigger other thoughts and serve other purposes. We must not suppose that only disconnected and useless experiences are candidates for AEs. Quite the opposite: precisely because AEs can be interesting and appreciated, by focusing and arousing the mind’s operations, they can be good vehicles for conducting attention and thought on to other practical matters. A beautifully painted face, or an impressively crafted clock, can evidently help achieve other goals.

An AE is a common enough kind of experience – but hard to define in words, as we see. We want to exclude the fragmentary spectrum of the fringes and margins of experience that goes mostly unnoticed or filtered out by the higher faculties of the mind. We care about and attend to AEs. Yet we don’t want to exclude intuitive feelings aroused by subconscious processing – not all AEs are prominently in the “theater” of the attentive self-consciousness although they color the scene. We should exclude much of experience focused on swiftly moving from means to means to means to some end; this chain of mechanically functional steps in routine experience are rarely experienced as aesthetic while undergoing them. If we do simultaneously attend to the overall pleasures available from doing a job well done, so to speak, then the mechanically routine can also be aesthetically special.

This occasional merger of the mechanically functional and the contemplatively aesthetic is our further clue to making progress with the aesthetic. An AE is appreciated because it has aroused mental processing that takes in its overall distinctiveness in addition to its inner parts – this attentive mental unification of an experience’s parts IS the aesthetic nature of that eventful experience. Without some focused mental processing within and through that entire experience, giving it its special holistic feeling, that experience could not have any aesthetic character. It is a huge mistake to suppose that the mind is quiet and still during AEs, or to suppose that the aesthetic character of an experience arises in sensory qualities prior to any intellectual processing. AEs may seem to be passive and thoughtless, as if blank mindless gazes upon motionless paintings could be the ideal mode of aesthetic appreciation. Nothing could be further from the truth. Attention and appreciation for an eventful experience is infused with active mental processing, and it must be so infused, otherwise the experience could not be recognized as *an* experience – it would instead be fluidly merged within a flowing series of experiences headed elsewhere for other ends.

It is no refutation of this theory of the AE to point out that we often find great aesthetic appreciation in an extended flux of continuously progressive moments of experience. Psychologists point to the athlete’s feeling of “being in the zone” when almost thoughtlessly executing dazzling performances (sinking ten basketball shots in a row, for example). That distinctive feeling of being in the zone, so typically described as a highly enjoyable and valued,

illustrates the theory of the AE offered here, rather than contradicting it. An athlete could not “be in the zone” unless his mental faculties were operating very efficiently, and an athlete could not recognize and recount “being in the zone” unless the whole feeling of being in the zone was recognizably distinctive as an eventful experience. Furthermore, being in the zone is a AE because it is appreciated in itself as well as appreciated for its practical service to other goals (like scoring enough points to win the game for the team). Athletes appreciate “being in the zone” for more than just scoring points. Similarly, the point of focused meditation may be to reach a stage of consciousness in which “the mind is stilled”, but unless that stage is entirely anaesthetic, one’s appreciation of its aesthetic character (the “bliss” or the “peace”, and so forth) necessitates minimal mental functioning sufficient to recognize its accomplishment and special nature. The mind is never turned off or turned aside during the appreciation of an aesthetic event in experience. Quite the opposite – mental interest and interrogation into an experience is essential to its aesthetic character.

Passivity is poison to the aesthetic. What deadens the senses and deadens the mind is deadly for AE. Conversely, enlivening the senses and energizing the mind smoothes the way towards the aesthetic. All AEs are active and participatory to some degree. Along with all observational experience, AEs contain the results of higher brain processing, so an AE is never just a static register of a present sensory field. An AE is created by combining the past with the present, blending some of the intellect’s reserves with the senses’ new riches. All of the mind’s powers of inquiry and knowledge are available for AEs. Whatever invigorates the mind’s processing of rich experience is conducive to AEs. Not surprisingly, the invigoration of activity and participation can result in AEs just as easily as bodily rest. Listening to music in a relaxed pose, walking around a sculpture, and joining in a dance are all equally valid ways to arouse AEs. Some art forms are designed to take advantage of intense mental activity alone, so bodily passivity is recommended. Other art forms demands observer activity, producing AEs only possible through the observer’s own explorations, both physical and mental. In all cases the intellectual is thoroughly bound up with the aesthetic and impossible to eliminate from it.

To summarize, an AE begins in an exploratory observation, exploratory in at least the mental sense if not also a bodily sense. Focused integration of observation’s results can culminate in an appreciation for the whole experience as a distinctive unity, completing an AE. Attention, exploration, observation, integration, appreciation: these are handy labels for stages going on for the person having the AE. Each of these labels designate an interaction and relationship going on between a person and something in the environment. AEs are hardly just “in the mind” and far from merely “imaginative” in the narrow sense of having only a mental existence. The imagination is rightly regarded as essentially involved in all phases of AE, but this term’s unfortunate idealistic connotations (leading to ‘image’ and ‘imaginary’) force us to be more specific about the mental processes involved in AE.

All metaphysical dualism has to be held off for now, or AE will be misunderstood from the start. AEs are right where they seem to be: they are in situations involving our interactions with things in the environment. Perhaps some experiences are purely mental, but that is not characteristic of AEs. Even the most “inner” moments of blissful meditation partially involve bodily control. The person takes explorations of, makes observations upon, forms integrations of, and develops appreciations for matters ongoing in the available environment. We have said very little about those envioning matters. So far, we have only described the personal side of AEs, but that’s an appropriate place to begin since AEs are quite personal, but they are much more besides.

3. Aesthetics and Criticism

Aesthetics and criticism are most intimately related, despite appearances to the contrary. Appreciating how incredible diverse peoples’ AEs can be, it can seem impossible to know where criticism might begin. Your AE of a Tuscan piazza and my AE of a Tuscan pizza are special for each of us, to be sure. How could a third person’s critical comparison of two AEs be possible, since the critic cannot know these AEs as we each do? The critic would get nowhere interrogating just me, either. Would my delight in a familiar sound be judged inferior or inadequate to my reverie induced by an arresting view? No external critic could justly criticize my AEs, taken singly for the momentary experiences that they are. Indeed, all AEs happily dwell on a level field before some intellectual busybody dare interrupts.

I could volunteer to be own critic, it is true – if I select two AEs for a comparison, my judgments are hence my own. But why would I bother? Arbitrarily comparing two AEs is whimsical and profitless; a chosen preference would be just as arbitrary. Each AE is what is, and pretends to be nothing more. The intellect must have some practical concern, some need for its interference, to justify getting in between AEs. The imagination will sustain comparisons in memory, so then reflection can compare their features. Intellectual contemplation on two AEs of the same kind, or consideration of the work of obtaining a desired AE, or a comparison of the work of obtaining two different AEs, would

be obvious starting points for the intellect. I can realize how one AE is more intense than another AE; I can realize how difficult it is to obtain a certain AE, and I can realize how obtaining one AE is usually easier than obtaining another AE. Already the intellect offers sortings of AEs into various kinds; the intellect is so practical that it yields comparisons of generic types of AEs rather than specific individual AEs. Eating a Tuscan pizza is preferable to eating a hotdog; going to Tuscany for a Tuscan pizza is a costly venture; buying a hotdog is easier than buying a Tuscan pizza. Indeed, since all specific AEs, once enjoyed, fade quickly into the past, the intellect is really focused elsewhere. Primary concern for present and future kinds of AEs arouses the intellect's full powers.

Pursuit of preferred AEs is intelligently done to the degree that intellectual comparison of means of obtaining AEs is involved. All intelligence is at root critical comparison and judgment. When exercised on AEs, or exercised on choices between an AE and something else, intelligence critically deals with an AE, and we may begin to speak of aesthetics. "Critical" aesthetics is the thoughtful control over things that provoke AEs. While resulting from applied intelligence, critical aesthetics is not yet art criticism, for we are not yet talking about art, but only about aesthetic experiences, and art and AEs are not the same thing. Many things are called art but they yield few AEs, while many more things yield plenty of AEs but they are not art. Art can inspire AEs, and for a good reason. The existence of artworks is only possible because intelligence can undertake aesthetic criticism, which in turn presupposes the prior occurrences of AEs. The reverse relationship holds as well. That is why the intelligent pursuit of AEs can inspire art, and for a good reason. The existence of many kinds of AEs is only possible because intelligence can critically suggest artificial means, which in turn can take physical embodiment in artworks. Art could not exist unless humans already had the capacity for critical aesthetics.

Before we can discuss art directly, we must discuss the aesthetic aspects of things in general. The natural environment, the human body and human behavior, along with our cuisine, clothing, shelter, tools, and all other artifacts are obvious materials for critical aesthetics. Critical aesthetics is one of intelligence's natural functions as humans thoughtfully pursue a variety of AEs. Humans been doing critical aesthetics for a long time, probably as long as the homo sapiens species has been around or even longer. We modify our surrounding environments, we remake ourselves (in body modifications, dress, and performance), and we make our artifacts, all with evident skill and enthusiasm. Art is one special way of controlling AEs, but we intentionally modify all sorts of things to have aesthetic aspects. Attempting to design things so that they have aesthetic aspects elevates critical aesthetics to its fullest capacities.

Critical aesthetics refers the human activity; we may also refer to a thing's aesthetics, or aesthetic features (hereafter AFs), when that thing has been modified by critical aesthetics. Generally speaking, AFs cannot exist apart from AEs – as defined here, AEs are always of AFs and AFs are experienced in AEs. The difference between AEs and AFs only distinguishes the two poles of the aesthetic relationship between a thing and an appreciator. AEs and AFs cannot be ontologically separated into radically independent entities. Only for convenience should they be discriminated, to indicate the contingent relationships holding between the makers of AFs and the appreciators of AEs. For example, just because a maker designs a thing to have an AF, that does not necessarily imply that anyone else will notice it, or if this AF is noticed, that it will arouse the same AE in others. AFs are no more "universalizable" than AEs. They both require at least one person, but they do not require two people to recognize them in the same exact way. However, for many AFs, it is evidently possible (if not easy) for a suitably designed AF to affect people in more or less the same way, arousing AEs within some range of variability. This possibility is most obviously exploited in the case of written language, in which exceedingly minimalist connections between a mark's shape and its associated sound permit many trained people to recognize them in about the same way. Ambiguity can never be entirely eliminated, of course. Trying to eliminate ambiguity is as inimical to aesthetics as maximizing ambiguity. The deliberate making of AFs falls within the broad middle range of partial ambiguity, where experience and the intellect have the most to work with.

An entirely natural object, unmodified by any human, can arouse AEs spontaneously and we accordingly appreciate such an object as having AFs. An entirely natural object can possess AFs because critical aesthetics is involved, not in the sense that the natural object itself is made by a human, but in the sense that the situation of aesthetic appreciation is selected by a human. Recall that AEs exist in situations involving our interactions with things in the environment. To the extent that we exercise deliberate control over such interactions, we can engage critical aesthetics and hence make a situation that has AFs. A landscape, a sunset, a waterfall, and a cloud can arouse AEs for their AFs, as a human being frames out a perspective for a landscape, waits for the best time to gaze on a setting sun, hikes closer to a waterfall, or selects one bulky shaped mass in the sky as a cloud. All four of these things – a landscape, a sunset, a waterfall, and a cloud exist only because of perspective, some perspective with a perceiver involved. Landscapes don't exist for worms; sunsets require attention to the sun at the right moment; waterfalls are very different matters if you are a fish; and the boundaries where one cloud stops and another begins is rarely

determined by atmospheric conditions. Furthermore, we do deliberately control situations for better appreciating the AEs of all these sorts of things. We find better ways to situate ourselves for appreciating a landscape or a sunset, for example. The general principle at stake is that AFs involve selective and attentive perceivers, which will prove to be a crucial principle when the definition of that artwork is our topic. For now, keep in mind how AFs require only attentive human involvement, so natural objects can have AFs, although most aesthetic objects are physically constructed by humans.

The realm of critical aesthetics includes all human activities of modifying or creating things to (among other aims) enhance their capacity for arousing AEs. Things modified by critical aesthetics can be conveniently called “aesthetic objects.” An aesthetic object is typically not primarily aesthetic; many other capacities, features, and functions may dominate it. Almost anything can have aesthetic features, and most aesthetics never results in art. Aesthetic objects may include an automobile or an ashtray or an artwork; so long as it has deliberately AFs, it is an aesthetic object with aesthetic features. Natural things can be the subjects of artistry too (you paint a landscape or photograph a tree) precisely because they can already be the natural objects of critical aesthetics. Painters paint marvelous landscapes that can’t actually be found anywhere on the planet.

4. Artistry and the Artwork

Artistry is a special subcategory of the general realm of critical aesthetics. Artistry is the technology of aesthetics. Critical aesthetics has been defined as the thoughtful creation of things’ AFs for provoking AEs. Technology in its widest sense is the intelligent invention of new techniques to enhance the efficacy of some human activity. (Do not equate technology with machinery, which is but one form of technology.) The technology of aesthetics (artistry) is therefore the application of invented techniques for enhancing aesthetics. Artistry is focused on aesthetics; objects created by artistry will therefore be dominated by their aesthetics, although they may also have other features and functions as well. Since controlling the features of things has many other effects on observers besides producing AEs, such control may or may not primarily aim at producing AEs. Arousing aesthetic appreciation may be only one of many intended results and only a quite secondary or tertiary aim. However, if control of AFs is deliberate, artistry is involved whatever else may be going on.

Artistry refers to the human activity of creating things with AFs (alongside creating them to have other features too) in order to (among other aims) provoke aesthetic appreciation in observers of those things. A person could not do artistry without considerable skills in critical aesthetics. The primary skills of arousing one’s own AEs through careful selection for, and modification of, enviring things are the foundation for artistry. Each artist starts by being a critical aesthician for oneself; learning that others appreciate similar things supplies the additional idea that aesthetics can have an audience. After that, the social cycle of doing artistry, gauging audience reaction, and refining one’s artistry accordingly, can gradually enhance artistic skills. One can do critical aesthetics for oneself; artistry is always for others too. Artistry at minimum requires three physical entities: the person creating the thing having AFs; the thing having the AFs; and another person appreciating the AFs. Plenty of AEs are involved in this creative process, as they exist in the multiple person-thing relationships, but they are not independently existing entities and no two must be the same. Theoretically, AEs could also be aroused by direct stimulation of the central nervous system; careful electrical stimulation of the cortex could no doubt arouse many aesthetic reactions. We shall set this possibility aside for future neural aestheticians; our current manner of making sensory observation upon external enviring things remains the sort of artistry for consideration here.

Technology and artistry are twins, born of the same mind, forever linked in spirit, and endlessly co-creative. They both spring from the human need to intelligently discriminate, select, and pursue potential AEs. All technology ultimately aims at applying intelligence for the efficient pursuit of things appreciated. No sharp dichotomy between technology and artistry can be tolerated, however. Why for example should it be assumed that technology is exclusively concerned with means, while artistry stays focused on ends? Our species intertwines them in endlessly creative ways. Humans efficiently select appreciated ends within their means, and artfully design the means to their appreciated ends. The same basic skills required for good technology are required for creating fine aesthetics in things. This is why so many of the skills necessary for artistry are also necessary for technology, such as attention to detail, careful precision, refined technique, intricate design, and extraordinary virtuosity.

Getting closer to artworks, we are narrowing down the kinds of things we are talking about. Artworks belong to a small subset of all the things that have AFs. Artworks are the result of artistry, but so is much else besides. Other things besides artworks can be produced by artistry to arouse AEs, such as adding decorative aspects to an artifact like a mask or a teapot. All artworks are aesthetic, but not all aesthetic objects are artworks. The terms “art” and “artistry”

are often used to cover all aesthetic work. This mistake invites avoidable vagueness and confusion. People do artistry when they design things so that displaying aesthetics is among their primary functions. Merely modifying a thing so that its aesthetics is enhanced is not artistry. For example, modifying the design of an automobile to be more aerodynamic can accidentally enhance its aesthetics, but this car redesign is not automatically doing artistry as well. Even if the car redesigner intentionally modifies the car's aerodynamics in order to also increase its aesthetics, this activity is not artistry and the car does not become art too. Temptations to broaden "art" to cover what is here termed "aesthetics" are numerous. We appropriate aesthetic objects from other cultures and put them in our museums, so we want to call them art too. We admire the virtuosity of craftsmen producing things having nice aesthetics so we want to call them all artists. These sorts of cases will be satisfactorily dealt with.

An artifact with fine aesthetic aspects that was not originally intended as an artwork can become an artwork by changing its social context (placing in it a museum, for example). Successfully arousing intentionally desired AEs is *not* a proper criteria for identifying art. Plenty of art fails to arouse much aesthetic reaction, plenty of art fails to arouse 'intended' reactions, and most art arouses far more unintended aesthetic reactions. Yet all art is primarily designed to produce aesthetic reactions. Art activities are experimental attempts to arouse AEs, although which AEs are aroused cannot be accurately predicted. Mere aesthetic objects that are not artworks are designed to have primary functions other than arousing AEs, although they may arouse AEs. If craftsmen design their crafts primarily for their practical functionality and durability, ensuring that these functions dominate over aesthetic features, they are not doing art and they are not producing artworks. On the other hand, if craftsmen ensure that an object's aesthetics dominate as much as any other consideration, they are doing art and producing artworks. Artists can sometimes be craftsmen and vice-versa. Indeed, it is frequently the case that an object's aesthetics are crucial for its practical utility, and vice-versa. For example, the installation of fine art in a monarch's waiting chambers served to impress ambassadors and courtiers; public architecture similarly blends aesthetics with other functionalities.

Because art and technology cannot be sharply distinguished, a continuum runs from the 'functional' tool to the aesthetic yet functional object to the 'useless' artwork. Only with great care could 'function' or 'design' help distinguish artworks from non-artworks. After all, artworks are designed to function as arousers of AEs, and mere tools may be so functionally designed that they automatically possess aesthetic aspects. The only adequate way to apply function to the wide range of artifacts from mere tools to aesthetic objects to artworks is to notice the varying degree of aesthetic design. If we can learn the intent of the designer, assigning degree of aesthetic intent is simplified. Mere tools with accidental aesthetics (if any) are located towards one end of the continuous spectrum, while useful objects possessing fine aesthetic aspects fall in the broad middle range, and impractical objects entirely dominated by aesthetic purpose lie toward the other end of the spectrum. If the designer's intent is unknown, we may be unable to confidently tell whether an object is an artwork, although the joint dominance of impracticality and intricacy would be good clues that was intended to be an artwork.

Locating things on this spectrum must be flexible assignments – as noted already, changing the context or the use of an object can shift it across this spectrum. By the very nature of art, it is impossible to sharply and permanently divide artworks from all other sorts of things. That is why any sharp dichotomy between "art" and "craft" is spurious. That is also why there can be no categorical definition of the concept of art, in that traditional sense of categorization as identifying the essentially unique traits of artwork. There is no trait that an artwork possesses that cannot be possessed by some things that are not art. Art has no 'essence' supplying it with a unique aloof existence from everything else. This essay offers a different sort of definition of art and artworks: art is the activity of designing people, their relationships, nature, and artifacts primarily for arousing aesthetic reactions, while the artwork is the material embodiment of the design of art. If something meets this minimum criterion for art, then it is at least art, even while it may also be many other sorts of things besides. If something never arouses any AEs in anyone, not even the designer, then it cannot be an artwork.

Artworks must be experienced aesthetically, somehow and somewhen. This platitude does not mean that artworks only exists in AE, but it must at least involve somebody's AE, even if only the artist's. Artworks are physically embodied entities whose ontological existence does not depend on human experience – artworks exist out in the external world but they do not exist beyond human experience. Artworks are experienced. Metaphysical dualists who again insist that an experience must be internally mental, locked away from anything externally physical, would infer from the reasonable claim that artworks are experienced the ridiculous claim that art cannot be out there in the physical external world. This metaphysical dualism is untenable for many good reasons, including the fact that it is false to the way that artworks are actually experienced. When we appreciate a sculpture, we are appreciating the physical piece of sculpture right there in front of us, and we are not appreciating some inner image that seems purely

mental in nature. We must continue to view dualism with due suspicion throughout our discussion of aesthetics and art.

Given what has been said about aesthetics and artworks so far, we can say more about the nature of artworks. Artworks are primarily designed to arouse AEs, and they may have additional primary functions as well. AEs are aroused when the observer goes through the aesthetic process of attention, exploration, observation, integration (etc., etc.), culminating in appreciation. We may infer that whatever enhances the aesthetic process typically increases the chances of arousing AEs. An artwork should try to draw attention to itself, it should provoke exploration, it should guide observation, it should suggest integration, and so forth. It is impossible to say to what degree an artwork ought to do any of these things. There is no detailed recipe for arousing AEs besides these obvious suggestions. The innumerable ways that people get aroused into AEs defies any specific prescription for artworks. Nevertheless, the design of an artwork is naturally guided by considerations about how and why people have AEs, or fail to have AEs.

Perhaps the distinctive traits of artworks can stand out better by contrasting them with the traits of tools. No lack of design in tools, of course, but utility dominates. Not just utility, but the further traits conducive to utility such as best fit to other things external to it, and strict conformity to standards preset beyond it. The tool must fit just right to do the job. Functionality, interconnectedness, conformity, predictability – the ideal tool ought to have very little distinctiveness about it. Peculiarity and variability are not needed and usually undesirable in a good tool. We might speak of a mechanic who has the “special” tool just for the job, but this tool was probably obtained from a manufacturer who can supply hundreds more just like it. Even the unique tool crafted only for a very rare task still must answer to that sort of job. External conformity characterizes the tool – the tool conforms to expectations firmly set by entirely external matters. The tool exercises no influence over those external matters. It would be a poor tool that demanded modifying the task at hand to be done.

The reason why crafted form needn't narrowly follow its function is because seemingly excess form serves other functions for humans. The “useless” stylistics given to an implement are expansively serviceable for aesthetic appreciation, for example. Form follows function especially in the human world, where anything crafted, from a dish to a dance, can simultaneously satisfy several human appetites. Supposing that a singular form must only serve one particular function is an avoidable fallacy, especially in light of humanity's ample craftiness. Impracticalities do not diminish utility, while humans are so good at inventing novel needs. Why would clever humans be so wasteful, by ignoring opportunities for ensuring that something we have assembled, no matter how material like clothing or abstract like music, can serve multiple purposes? Indeed, for us humans, the higher abstractions of symmetry, harmony, and beauty have proven to be the most useful of all, essential for informational densities and organizational solidarities. A towering monument or an inspirational song can move millions. The less functional something appears when taken for just structure, the more functions are usually involved, and higher capabilities of humans are implicated.

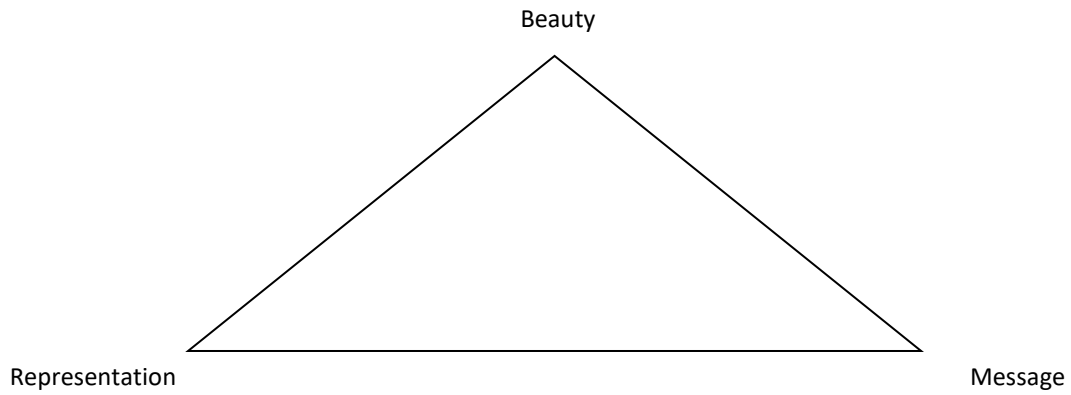
If artworks tend to occupy the opposite end of the spectrum, we can head in that direction by giving some attention to the designed artifacts residing in the middle range – objects crafted to include some aesthetics. From chandeliers and carpets to wharfs and warehouses, these functional things can be given aesthetic capacities. An aesthetically crafted object still should reliably conform to its expected primary function. An attractive bowl will serve food, beautiful lamp will illuminate a room, and so forth. Again, we must not suppose that a functional lamp cannot therefore be an artwork – it all depends on its primary functions. At this point, what the observer thinks about the lamp does not determine its status. If I really enjoy the aesthetics of an attractive lamp in a museum, it may only be a lamp and not an artwork. Objects crafted to primarily serve some practical function are normally expected to fulfill that function regardless of whether anyone appreciates its aesthetics. One good test is whether the object in question (like a lamp) would soon get fixed upon failing to serve that function. By contrast, a lamp primarily designed for aesthetic appreciation may never actually illuminate a room. An aesthetic practical object can be less functional, interconnected, and conformist to a degree, and it can be more peculiar and unusual. The well-crafted object will still conform to preset external standards of functionality, even if manages to present unique aesthetic traits. Let us call such objects “craft objects” to indicate their primary functionality as crafts.

The distinction between art and craft, has some validity if only taken to roughly indicate locations somewhere on the aesthetic spectrum. We have looked at the middling range closer to tools in which craft objects only secondarily have aesthetic features. Proceeding further away from tools, there is a neighboring middle range for crafted objects designed by choice of material and style to exemplify functional objects but aesthetics dominates as well as function. These crafted objects are artworks since aesthetics is built into their primary functioning. Indeed, the very fact that such objects exemplify traditional crafts such as pottery or furniture can be used by artists to ensure that aesthetics dominates. The form and style of ceramic pottery, for example, can be so evocative of special

aesthetics (taking advantage of the long traditions and cultural echoes inherent to pottery) that they can only be achieved in pottery.

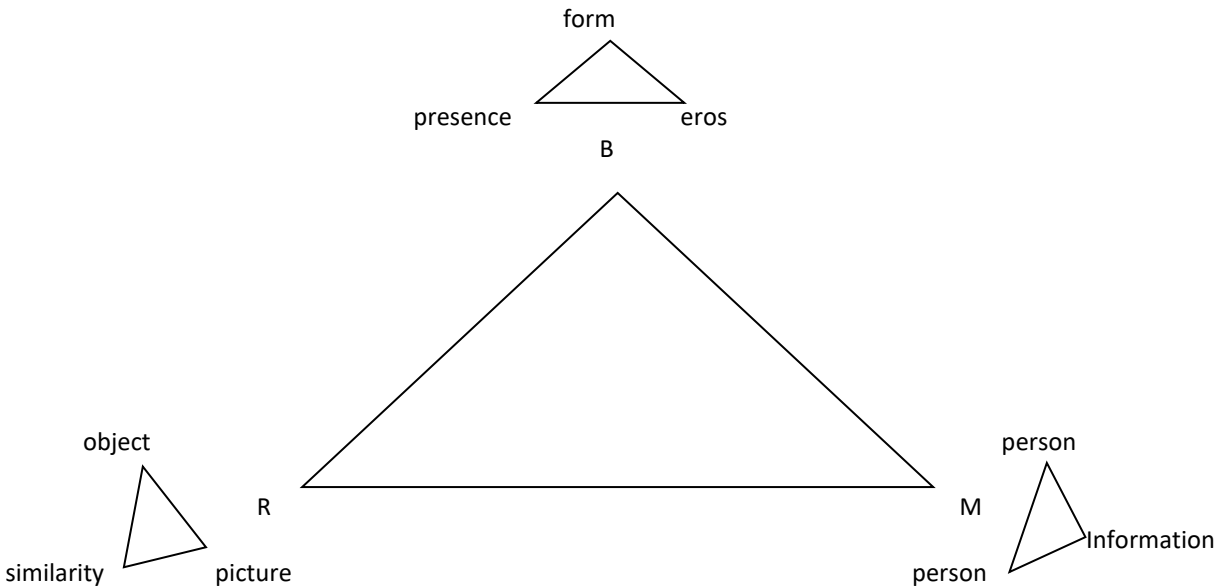
Proceeding farther on the artwork side of the spectrum, we can now predict that functionality will diminish and aesthetics will dominate. In that direction, artworks will have less external conformity and more internal peculiarity. Artworks are in one sense self-sufficient; they are not created primarily in order to conform to external standards for functionality. In short, an artwork will have some individuality, since it possesses enhanced integral unity and distinctive wholeness. Not surprisingly, these crucial traits are characteristic of the AEs aroused by artworks. Objects lacking unique features and possessing only a few familiar traits will not easily arouse aesthetic appreciation. We may speak of the aesthetic powers of balanced complexity, or harmonious form, and so forth. Warned against recipes for aesthetics already, listing such powers innocently points to artworks' many modes of creatively engaging the minds of observers. Individuality does this, very well. Great artworks probably engage some of the intellectual powers that we naturally use for understanding other people.

5. Art has three telos or modes



The three extreme nodes: pure beauty, pure message, pure picture.
 The three opposite telos: to teach a value, to deliver a truth, to display natural beauty
 The Center Area: celebrating the human experience = art

2. Each node is a triadic relation.



3. The Three TELOS: BM = social valuation RM = knowledge of truths BR = natural processes

The Three Pure Modes: their relation to the three telos.

(1) Pure beauty = pure form

From the BM range, pure beauty is eros desire, the intrinsically valuable.

From the BR range, pure beauty is abstract presence.

From the RM range, known truth is irrelevant to pure beauty – chasm between knowledge and erotic presence.

(2) Pure message = pure information

From the BM range, pure message is valuable information for another person(s).

From the RM range, pure message is one individual's private knowledge.

From the BR range, natural beauty seems irrelevant to pure information – chasm between nature and information.

(3) Pure representation = pure similarity

From the BR range, similarity is the beauty of any individual object in all its concreteness.

From the RM range, similarity is abstract truth regardless of its ever becoming knowledge.

From the BM range, social values seem irrelevant to pure similarity.

The Three Pure Telos: natural process, social value, known truth. If art exemplifies all three telos, then art is a natural process having a social value for providing knowledge.

Question: What is that in experience which uses the three nodes to balance beauty, value, and truth?

Answer: Human art, which can lead to religion.

Danger: Each of the three pure modes leads in its extreme to a place transcending human experience: absolute truth, pure form, information essence.

The extreme modes can be restrained from entirely transcending experience. What pulls pure form back? The presence of desire. What pulls pure information back? Relations between people. What pulls pure similarity back? Picturing the object.

Therefore, the avoidance of transcending human experience requires these three criteria for GENUINE ART: For beauty, a natural presencing of a desired value. For message, an other's valuing of a person's knowledge. For representation, a truthful picturing of an object's nature.

The "criteria" for Art are not criteria in the sense that all three criteria must be fully satisfied. Rather, differently realized art works will manifest the criteria to differing degrees.

But: there are tensions between the opposite telos! What is the medium of harmonization?

Answer: Shared Practical Experience.

SHARED
PRACTICAL
EXPERIENCE
of
WORKING
TOWARDS
COMMON
GOODS

persons together
doing activities
in an environment
who are
engaged in conduct
coordinated to
achieve our
satisfactions

the opportunity for genuinely creative aesthetics. Furthermore, since the intense aesthetics of designed artworks demands impressive virtuosity and thoughtful creativity, only hand-made artwork could fulfill such expectations. However, if a machine were constructed in order to produce beautiful pottery, could such pottery at least be crafted artworks? Art has been defined as the human activity of producing aesthetically dominant objects, and this definition does not exclude humans using machines to produce such objects. After all, artists use machines to make musical (from violins to synthesizers) and artists use machines (from video cameras to computers) to make digital graphics and videography. Why can't an artist use an industrial machine to make fine pottery artwork? Whether something is entirely hand-made or machine manufactured has become an irrelevant factor in discriminating art from non-art. The relevance of machine-made origins is only relevant to the practical question of how to make great designed artworks.

The fact that no machines are presently capable of creating designed artworks in such categories of sculpture and literature sustains the temporary distinction between machine-made and hand-made artworks. However, programmers have already designed software that artificially creates musical pieces imitative of Mozart. The resulting pieces clearly are designed artworks and they sound like mediocre pieces reminiscent of Mozart. Are the programmers artists? Hardly, because they admit very little musical proficiency much less expertise in Mozart. The computer acquires Mozart-like compositional skills only because it has been programmed with much of Mozart's actual music and instructed in inventing variations upon that body of work. Is the computer the artist? Perhaps. We may have a case in which the programmers and the computer together are "the artist", or we may instead deny that artworks must have identifiable artists. However, since there has been artwork produced, there has been a human activity of art – and as humans were essentially involved from the computer's design to the software's design, this sort of case does not supply a refuting counterexample to the general definition of art offered here. Since machine-based artificial intelligences are not yet autonomously creating designed artworks, we can hold off on considering such cases here (although we'd eventually describe such AI machines as artists anyways). In the meantime, we can attribute the role of "artist" to the human-machine cooperation of making art in odd cases like the artificial Mozart music.

The existence of artworks is sustained in systematic web of interrelated things: the artist's activity of designing and creating the artwork, the artwork's physical embodiment with its special capacities, and the observer's intellectual exploration and appreciation of the artwork. Eliminating from this web any one of its components eliminates the existence of the artwork. An artwork must have a creator, a physical embodiment, and an appreciator. That does not mean that two people and one thing are minimally required for art – we are speaking of roles played in this definition. However, one person is minimally required: the role of the artwork, and the role of the appreciator, may also be played by the artist. The example of an functional object, initially created for use but later installed in a museum as an artwork, does not supply a counter example to the definition of the artwork offered here. It could be a counter example if undue attention is paid to the fact that the creator of the object was not in fact an artist (the creator was only trying to make a nice looking bowl, for example). We have agreed that placing, for example, a Native American piece of pottery in a museum can make that pottery into an artwork. But who made it into an artwork? The artist(s) is whoever placed it into the museum in order to offer it as an object primarily for aesthetic appreciation. Placing foreign objects into Western art museums is properly categorized as artifactual art in which the creator of the object and the artist offering it for aesthetic appreciation happen to be two different people. The specific kind of artifactual artform labeled as "Found Art" might serve as a useful label here. The category of found art can be taken too far, and art has not missed this opportunity. Duchamps' Fountain was not primarily an activity of art but an act of art criticism; at least aesthetics was involved. In general, someone who now puts a suitably non-aesthetic object (a labeled empty space, a random aggregate of trash, or just a sign stating that the exhibit has been closed) isn't doing art anymore, but only art criticism, by taking advantage of expectations aroused by locations within designated art spaces like galleries. Yes, emptiness and trash and even a literal sign can be viewed aesthetically with great effort, but such exhibits are intentionally designed to primarily not arouse such aesthetic reactions (that would defeat the whole point) so therefore they cannot be artworks.

Sociality, technology, and aesthetics are continually interconnected and intertwined by intelligence, searching for improvements. We have already spoken of the 'first order' realm of AEs and the 'second order' realm of aesthetics. Artistry belongs to a 'third order' realm, the technology of aesthetics. Art criticism is a 'fourth order' realm, produced by a community devoted to understanding and improving artistry. Finally, philosophy of art is a 'fifth order' realm undertaken by a community trying to understand AEs, aesthetics, artistry, and art criticism in their many origins, widest implications, and fullest potentials. In general, intellectual effort to judge (to understand, interpret, evaluate, improve, etc.) what is going on in one order belongs mostly to the next higher order, while a higher order must consider the lower orders. Judgment upon AEs leads toward aesthetics; judgment upon aesthetics leads toward artistry; judgment upon artistry leads toward art criticism; judgment on art criticism leads toward philosophy of art;

while judgment upon philosophy of art is open to philosophy generally as all relevant matters may be taken into consideration.

Notice that the all-too-common equivocation or overlapping of the disciplines of “aesthetics”, “art criticism”, and “philosophy of art” is helpfully prevented in this scheme of five orders of rising complexity. Aesthetics only concerns the nature of AEs and intellectual judgment and control over AEs. Confusing philosophy of art with aesthetics can result in simplistic notions of art as mere qualitative experiences, or inadequate theories of art that cannot distinguish artworks from aesthetic aspects of non-artworks. Confusing art criticism with philosophy of art can result in inappropriate requirements that ‘true’ art support moral or political ideals, or unacceptable restraints on artistic intention to express ethical or political concerns.

The same person, an artist for example, can undertake all five orders of intellectual effort mentioned here. An artist, like everyone else, has personal AEs and makes aesthetic judgments. By making AWs in artistry, the artist can deliberately inspire AEs and other kinds of reactions in herself and in audiences. By engaging in art criticism, the artist can understand and evaluate the powers of works of art to arouse reactions. By engaging in philosophy of art, the artist can reflect on diverse ways of doing art and art criticism in relation to everything else going on in human life and culture. The intellectual effort to understand and judge (and maybe improve) art criticism is the province of philosophy of art, and in that order this essay properly belongs.

By understanding how the artist can serially or simultaneously engage in all five orders concerning art, we can explain matters like conceptual art or avant-garde art. For example, Duchamps’ Fountain is a work of art because it was deliberately placed as a candidate for appreciation to arouse just those AEs (those of a ceramic urinal) which could lead others to thoughtfully reconsider certain prevailing standards of art criticism (such as the standards that an artwork must be created by the artist for positive aesthetic features). Duchamps’ Fountain was also an act of art criticism, as Duchamp did brilliantly succeed with much of the art criticism and philosophy of art that he intended to arouse. Similarly, John Cage’s 4’ 33” is both an artwork and an act of art criticism because it was offered as an opportunity for distinctive AEs (arising from the appreciation for the ambient sounds available to the audience at that time) and it succeeded in arousing intended reflection over other questionable standards of art criticism. Such combined efforts can only be accomplished a few times; no one could put a urinal in an established museum today and simultaneously produce art and art criticism – the lesson has been learned.

Philosophers may obsess over whether a work of art can simultaneously be a work of art criticism or even a philosophical statement about art. There is really no need to credit a work of art itself with so much other work. Credit rather goes to the artist’s activity of inspiring art criticism and philosophy of art through a work of art. Artistry can also be art criticism, and it can occasionally rise to philosophy of art. It is the radical artist’s activity of producing and offering the artwork that simultaneously accomplishes art criticism, and not simply the artwork itself considered in isolation. An artist’s multiple capacities through artistry are paralleled in works of sociality and technology, the other primary cultural modes. For example, people experimenting with a novel form of social relationship (such as a commune) can simultaneously challenge standard social arrangements and inspire fresh social philosophy. As another example, engineers inventing a novel kind of technology (such as the internet) can simultaneously challenge notions of standard technologies and inspire fresh philosophizing over technology.

Technology and aesthetics keep humans occupied for much of life. We also can’t forget about the most ancient obligation of living: reproduction together. Reproductive sociality encompasses the reproduction of more humans and the reproduction of societies through generations. Sociality, technology, and aesthetics ultimately encompass everything that humans bother doing, and bother thinking about doing. These three modes of human living exhaust the proper aims of healthy human mentality and hence of human culture. Goodness, truth, and beauty are indeed the three most fundamental issues for the intellect to ponder. We rarely ponder them separately, as this triplet of values often work well together. We invent technologies of coercion to improve our sociality (religions and governments, for example); we form social communities for doing smarter technology (science teams and universities, for example); we invent technologies for enhancing our aesthetics (cosmetics and orchestras, for example). Sometimes we worry about how aesthetics is distorted by radical governments for political ends, and sometimes we worry about how society is perverted by new technologies for aesthetic pleasures. Philosophers ponder which of the three modes of life should take priority, and whether goodness, truth, and beauty might tend towards harmony. We can’t figure out these supreme philosophical problems here. Let’s return to the issue of art.

7. Forms of Art

The basic kinds of artworks are the personal arts (people designed to be artworks), the performing arts (people interacting), the natural arts (nature including life forms designed as artworks), the constructed arts (artifacts), and the combined arts (people interacting with organisms and/or artifacts).

Few true cases of personal art are available (although advanced genetic engineering and cosmetic surgeries will expand this category in the future). Dance is a paradigm example of performance art, landscaping gardens and growing colorful orchids are good examples of natural art, sculpture is paradigmatic of artifact art, and theater is a fine example of a combined art form. Further categorization of art and artworks is instructive, keeping in mind that the “art” is the activity of making the artwork, while the “artwork” is the physical embodiment created to be experienced for arousing AEs. Leaving aside personal and natural arts because there are relatively few examples, we here focus on performance, artifact, and combined arts.

Dance is a paradigmatic performance art. In ordinary performance dance, the audience observes the dancing performers. Dance has a special subcategory, the participatory dance, in which the performers also play the role of audience in their enjoyment of dancing. If dancers must interact with artifactual props and staging to create the intended artwork, then it is no longer dance, but rather a combined art such as theater. More examples of performance arts are the artforms of ballet, comedy, miming, and oral narrative. In the example of storytelling, the artist designs a (more or less) planned story to tell, and the narrator (perhaps the same person, or a second artist) creatively delivers the narrative in a performative way so that the narrator’s facial expressions and body language help create the artwork enjoyed by the audience. It is possible to enjoy a narrative over the radio, although much meaning is typically lost. Similarly, comedy will suffer loss of meaning if it is not viewed but only heard or read, since the integrated combination of the joke and the comedic delivery (often with exaggerated body language or props) completes this artform. Comedians working together to create a comedic ‘skit’ or ‘sketch’ adds a socially interactive dimension to this combined artform. Extended comedic sketches can become theater, although a distinction between comedy and theater can be maintained by understanding theatrical comedy as constructed from an interrelated series of staged comedic sketches. If the narrative, joke, sketch, or script is recorded in a written language for reading appreciation, that separate artwork joins the category of literature which is an artifact art instead.

Music is a more complicated performance art than dance. The musical artwork is the performance by musicians which creates the heard music for listening appreciation. Strictly speaking, the composed score is not the artwork, but rather an instruction set, an “artscript”, for creating a performed musical artwork using musical instruments (from clarinets to computers). Music is a combined art, bringing together performance and artifact. The artist designs an artscript that directs someone’s use of a musical artifact (the instrument) to create the musical artwork that is heard by the audience. Music is a performance art even though the musicians themselves are not the object of aesthetic appreciation, but rather the sounds their activities create. Music can be appreciated on the radio without seeing any musicians, while dance by contrast can be appreciated on television with no sound. However, music must be a performance art because the musical performance of the musicians is just as essential to musical aesthetics as the composer. In music, both the composer and musicians together are the “artist”. The artistic activity of music is a complex process involving stages and frequently many people. For example, a symphony composer designs an artscript (the musical score) for the musicians’ proper use of musical instruments (the orchestra) to create the artwork (the performed music) for the appreciation of an audience (who enjoy their heard sounds). Similarly, a composer can design both the computer software and a musical score to be processed by that software (the artscript) for execution by computer hardware connected to sound speakers (the instrument) that will play the music (create the artwork) for an audience. Song is a subcategory of music in which the role of musical instrument is played by the lungs, throat, and mouth, carefully developed and trained for singing. Similarly, clapping and other bodily percussions can create music. Specific combinations of musicians and musical instruments will form more subcategories of combined arts, such as singing along to music. Although some sort of instrument is required for music, the artscript is not always necessary. The musician(s) can play the role of the composer in real time by creating the music while playing, in such cases as the jazz improvisation.

Turning to artifact art, sculpture and painting are paradigmatic example. More recent artforms in this category are photography and electronic/digital media (but not video or film involving other artifacts, that fall into the combined art category). These artifact artforms arouse AEs by being viewed by audiences. Artifact art is not characterized by visual observation alone; artworks requiring some tactile experience or audience participation are categorized here as well. Literature is also an artifact art more akin to sculpture or painting than to music. The reader

of a book only needs the book; no other performer is involved. Literature might have a superficial similarity to music in that there is a script which is to be “performed.” However, the point of literature is that this artwork is supposed to be visually observed (or touched in the case of Braille) directly by the audience. The artist creates a literary work such as a written essay (or novel, etc.) having physical embodiment in such things as ink on paper or electrons in computers, etc. The literary work is then observed and interpreted by the audience, and this interpretation in the form of language arouses the AEs.

Because the literature artwork has to be “performed” to arouse AEs, could literature be a performance art? After all, the reader has perform the act of reading the book, and we have already mentioned artforms such as performative dance in which the audience comprises the performers. Why isn’t reading like performative dance? The key difference is that the dancer is creating the artwork, while the reader is interacting with the artwork. The reader is not essentially involved in creating the novel. Or is she? What if the “novel” was in fact whatever meaningful story is created in the reader’s mind during the act of reading the book? Perhaps the “artwork” in the case of literature is actually the interpreted and understood novel in the reader’s attentive mind. If so, then the role of the book would be more like the “artscript” composition from the example of music, which only directs the creation of the actual performance. If the artwork novel is simply whatever goes through the reader’s mind, then one book would arouse different artworks with every readers’ performance, much in the same way that a London orchestra’s performance of a Mozart symphony in 1938 is not the same performance of that Mozart symphony by a Boston orchestra in 2002. This speculative understanding of literature as a performance art should be resisted, for good reasons. First, the number and variety of “artworks” of literature proliferate into practically unlimited dimensions. Second, all these artworks become quite “mental” in nature, and we lose our grip on the actual natural world. Third, the reader would assume tremendous responsibility for the existence and character of the “artwork” – so much so, that the script and the author fade from relevance. Fourth, these problems would automatically ensue for the other artifact arts too – there are no physical sculptures, but only all the visual images aroused in all of the viewers’ minds.

But what about the “audiobook”? If a recording of someone reading a book is played on a machine for listening enjoyment, how is this different from listening to a recording of someone singing a song? If the singing is performance art, why isn’t the reading? The key difference is that the reader of the book, even if she is also the author, is adding no necessary aesthetic character to the literature. On the other hand, the singer is adding something aesthetically essential to the song – his unique vocalization of that song – so he is part of the artistry. The reader of a book doesn’t have to add any aesthetics; in fact, if any aesthetics are added, they may distract or detract from the intended aesthetics of the literature itself. Even if I enjoy bonus aesthetics from listening to the famous author reading her own book, those aesthetics are not part of the literature itself. On the other hand, some poetry, oratory, and the like may be expressly designed to be skillfully performed at special occasions. These cases fall into performance arts akin to oral narrative.

Combined arts typically have this sort of complicated set of activities involving many people that eventually result in artworks and then AEs. Along with music, the artforms of opera, theater, and film also fall into this combined category. The dramatist designs the script and setting, the producer and director (and others) add specific details about staging and characters, the actors perform the dialogue, singing, and action, and a staged play or a film showing (the artwork) results from this process to be appreciated by an audience.

In general, the “artistry” is the (complicated) process of activity to create the eventual “artwork” experienced by an audience. The art activity will have features characteristic to its artform, the artwork will belong to one artform or another, and the audience should appreciate the artwork as belonging to that artform. Although there can be cases where an artwork could be justifiable categorized in two kinds of artforms, a logical categorization scheme should minimize such instances. For example, Shakespeare’s play *Julius Caesar* might be both theater and literature, but this only means that “Julius Caesar” refers to a set of instructions which can be artfully executed to create either an artwork of literature or an artwork of theater. There are two artforms involved, not one artform requiring categorization in two separate categories.

8. Art Criticism

Because art has three necessary components, the artist’s activity of doing art, the resulting physical embodiment in an artwork, and the resulting AEs aroused in observers of the art, art criticism has three starting points for its own intellectual work. Poor theories of art criticism focus on only one, or two, of the three essential components.

Art criticism should help guide the interpretation of art and help judge the significance and quality of artworks. Challenging and changing artistic standards is important for art, and art criticism rightly notices and

interprets such effort. During the 20th century, expectations of art have been refuted and overturned. Some philosophical art critics think that every standard or measure of art has been refuted. Art criticism has gotten too independent from art. If so, what do art critics really know anymore? The measure of important art no longer needs to involve artistic intent, aesthetic expression, or communicating with the audience. The artists themselves are no longer the best judges of art, or of even whether they are doing “real art.” Art criticism becomes empty and it mutates into just a nihilistic philosophy of art when all standards for art have fallen and no one really knows what might count as art and artistic quality. Artists could not be blamed for declaring independence from this kind of philosophical art criticism.

However, only artists can rescue this situation and revitalize aesthetics and art criticism. Artists, after all, became artists through a critical learning process of receiving criticism, criticizing their own work, and criticizing others’ art. Young artists enter a critical world that knows about the artistic medium, proven technique, and successful style. As artists mature into their own special mode of creativity and individuality, their playful bending and breaking of some critical standards is essential to arousing an audience’s thoughtful aesthetic appreciation. Don’t artists know something crucial about art criticism? Artists should demand that they matter: that the whole artistic process from artistic intent to artwork design to viewer interpretation really matters. Art is an interdependent activity essentially involving the creative contributions of artist, artwork, and audience. If art criticism refocused on this complex “ecosystem of doing art”, it could think again about interpretive and qualitative standards about art. Art criticism would know how and why art is made, and why it succeeds or fails. Standards of art would arise from comparing different ways that artists design artworks to arouse audience interpretation. The artists themselves would again be crucial to art standards since they would once again control the production of art, not the art critics or philosophers. Many artists can become skillful and confident art critics, as they master all the aspects of their art form’s significance and impact. Art critics would know their subject matter once again, instead of only wondering what radical deviation from art can be imagined next. What do art critics know? They can know the potentials and standards of artistic activity, they can know the struggles of intent and expression undergone by artists, and they can know how artworks provoke various reactions from audiences. But art critics must stay immersed in the art world and join in this ecosystem of art.

Summary:

1. Too much art criticism has floated off into philosophizing about art, forgetting its responsibility to help judge the significance and quality of artworks.
2. Many artists have helped distance art criticism away from its job by making too much art designed only to challenge, refute, or destroy standards for what might count as art and artistic quality.
3. Only artists can rescue the situation, by demanding that they really matter: that the whole artistic process from artistic intent to artwork design to viewer interpretation really matters.
4. Art is an activity essentially involving artist, artwork, and audience. Each component contributes its own creativity to the whole art process. If art criticism refocused on this complex “ecosystem of doing art”, it could think again about interpretive and qualitative standards about art.
5. Standards of art would arise from comparing different ways that artists design artworks to arouse audience interpretation. The artists themselves would again be crucial to art standards since they would once again control the production of art, not the art critics or philosophers.

Should artists proclaim their independence from the would-be art critics? Could artists be blamed for rebellion, since philosophical art critics have already declared independence from artists? These aloof art critics share a common disinterest in the artist and the artistic activity that creates artworks. These critics tell us the artist’s quest for the aesthetic is not really relevant. They tell us that the artist’s intentions for their art don’t really matter. They tell us that critics don’t need to know what art form or specific style the artwork belongs to. They tell us that the relationship between the artist and the audience really doesn’t matter. Do artists really matter anymore? The philosophical art critics only want to talk about the artwork itself, in relations to other artworks alone. Do art critics only know the artworks anymore? And if they only know the artworks, do they really know anything at all about art?

The modern field of art criticism was born during the Enlightenment crisis over what happens when art stops being useful. The distracting question of “Is it art, or just craft” began. Instead of talking about great art fulfilling moral, social, or political ends, art critics could talk about aesthetic standards internal to art itself. Definitions of art and the aesthetic proliferated. But that conversation didn’t last long. Maybe there were too many definitions, too many philosophies. When that conversation slowed from exhaustion in the late 19th century, critics next wanted to talk about changing or defying those standards of art.

Many artists helped the philosophical art critics looking for something to talk about. Standards became suspicious. Does aesthetics really matter? So artists produce abstractness, chaos, ugliness, and social commentary. Does artistic intent really matter? So artists produce obscurity, misdirection, and meaninglessness. Does artwork uniqueness really matter? So artists make mass-produced and endlessly reproducible art. Does artform or style really matter? So artists make works that utterly defy any classification. Does art really even need an artist? So “found art” starts appearing in exhibits.

To the continual delight of art critics during the 20th century, artists have compliantly done the real critical work. After every standard for art fell, one after another, art critics didn’t criticize the art but only “interpreted” it in relation to what was going on in the artworld. Art critics stopped doing real art criticism and only did philosophy of art, trying to reflectively explain what just happened after every art “revolution”. Artists were doing art criticism and art critics were doing philosophy. Together they formed a tight little community and then they persuaded museum curators and art collectors to play along. By the end of the 20th century, everyone “in the know” knew that anything could art and art could be anything. Just get it into an exhibit or a museum and get people to pay to see it and own it. Persuade someone important that it is “art” and suddenly it *is* art. Instead of art criticism being based on what you know about the art, art criticism simply became based on who you know.

Are there any standards for what counts as art, much less for quality art, anymore? The philosophical art critics says “No.” First, anything can be art -- after all, lots of things become art simply because a curator or an art critic decides that it is art. Second, the only remaining criterion for ‘quality’ is just ‘revolutionary’, when “art” rebels against some standard of art criticism. You can’t even recognize art without knowing philosophical art criticism anymore. After all, how can you tell if something is art in the first place? Why, of course, if it rebels (and only the philosophers can know for sure). That’s a tautological circle keeping philosophical art critics in the safe center, safely protected from any criticism.

Now that every standard has been questioned and destroyed, there only remain philosophers and curators (where is the artist?). And one wonders how curators are making their decisions anymore. They could try to appeal to the public, but that route makes the philosophers (and many artists now) sneer with derision. And the public may not be ready for that responsibility. Especially after they have been made ignorant about what is art and what is quality art by the last two centuries of Western art criticism. As everyone now complains about the irrelevance of art, who will save art?

Perhaps only artists themselves can rescue the dire situation. Can artists still matter? Most artists still have some concern for things like aesthetics, expressing intent, creating special artworks, and relating to an audience. A genuine definition of art as a kind of human activity could be revived. But “art” would have to viewed as a highly complex and interrelational process. The artist, the artwork, and the audience are the minimally necessary components of art. Excessive focus on just the artwork, apart from all context save the exhibition space to show it and the philosophical critic to interpret it, has led us down a dead end.

Artists must declare their independence from philosophical art criticism. Artists should demand real art criticism that takes them seriously again.

If art criticism took the three basic components (artist, artwork, audience) of art seriously, bad theories of art and art criticism can be avoided. For example, the audience is important to art. But we should not overemphasize the role of audience in judgment. It seems silly to suppose that the viewer is free to interpret/enjoy the artwork in any manner they can, as if neither the artist nor the artwork has much role in shaping the aesthetic experience. Is the artwork instead designed to elicit some range or broad type of aesthetic experience (rather than any experience at all, or the other extreme of precisely one 'right' aesthetic experience)? Of course, the artwork may fail in its aim, but there's an effort there.

Liberating the viewer completely has the unintended effect of minimizing the responsibility of the artwork itself, and the role of the artist. It also makes it quite impossible to think about any standards, and any evaluations of artworks. Of course, at this point the art critics step forward to offer their services, as if they know better than everyone else.

Art is grey area; interpretation. So what is the exact role of the artwork? Does the artwork itself have creative freedom? The freedom to elicit one exact experience or the liberty to take on a multitude of interpretations? If aesthetics are engrained into the nature of the artist creating the piece, isn't it still up to the artist to determine which freedom the artwork will possess? It may not be a clear message being conveyed, but some sort of direction. How can the artist create a piece of art without knowing or governing the outcome? Of course the artist is crucially involved. This is why the "abstract v. functional" and the "art vs. craft" dichotomies are bankrupt. The artist can create artistic functional pieces, and can create functionally artistic pieces -- there are no bright dividing lines to separate functional pieces that can't be high art from aesthetically impressive pieces that might have functional purpose, and neither of these can be sharply separated from "purely" aesthetic objects lacking all function. It's all a matter of interpretation in the end, and that is precisely what is significant and curious about art. Artists have the free creativity to wander all over that continuous spectrum -- what matters is whether the artwork provokes interpretation, and not whether it indicates the "right" interpretation.

The crucial importance of interpretation reminds us that we should not overemphasize the intent of the artist either. The intent of the artist provides key clues to what sort of art form and style the artwork belongs too, but little beyond that. There is hardly any direct contact between the artist and the audience -- after all, the artwork is the medium. The artist creates the artwork with a design to arouse reactions from the audience, but those reactions cannot be exactly predicted, nor should they be. Even titling the work only inspires more interpretations. If the audience reaction to something is highly predictable, we are probably not talking about art anymore, since the artist has instead found some much more literally direct mode of communicating with the audience.

The viewers are key players in the artistic process. Without them, the art does not get a chance to be interpreted in a multitude of different ways. It is critical to have a variety of creative views on one single piece of art. However, we have already warned against giving all the responsibility for art to the audience. The dynamic relationships between artwork and audience is what is important about artistic reaction.

Besides, the audience is not all-knowing. An enjoyer of art is just that -- one individual enjoyer of art. If everyone is personally tied to their own aesthetic values, then their opinions are just critiques in and of themselves. The viewers are all critics in their own right. What makes an 'art critic' different from any other viewer with an opinion? Are art critics completely unbiased? Not if aesthetics have anything to say about it. Do they then put aside their personal grasp on art to 'grade' the art? What is the point of a grade anyway? An art critic by himself has no more right to offer an "objective" evaluation of art than any other viewer. If art criticism is possible, then it must be because art critics are working together with artists and audiences. No one can do it alone. What is needed is a culture of art criticism, a culture with a history and a future. Art used to have that associated critical culture. Now too many people in the artworld want to be philosophers too.

We have so far talked about the essential creative roles of artist and audience. Does the artwork itself have creative freedom? Perhaps.

Great design in an artwork somehow has its own powers, powers to arouse aesthetic reactions in viewers. Complex and intertwined powers -- so complex that no one can really predict how a viewer will react. This explains why different people get different aesthetic experiences from the art. This explains why the power of an artwork will always diverge somewhat from an artist's "intentions", but the artist's intentions remain partially relevant too. It also explains how bad design will either arouse an excessively wide variety of reactions (e.g. art that is too simplistic or abstract), or only can arouse one type of reaction (e.g. art that is just repetitive cliché kitch). Great art has focused powers to creatively inspire a certain range of aesthetic reactions, and each viewer's own interpretive sensibilities complete the whole process to produce that specific aesthetic experience for that person at that time of viewing.

This notion that art is designed to have 'focused' powers is connected with another interesting notion -- that an artwork is an 'individual' -- it is a special object with unique properties. Artworks are designed to be somewhat like individuals, analogous to human persons. Creative freedom is an essential trait of individual persons, yes?

Art is an activity essentially involving artist, artwork, and audience. This three-term relational system is the absolute minimum for understanding art. No one aspect of the art process has true independence. It's an artistry ecosystem. Organic ecosystems of symbiotic individuals. Not independence, but organic interdependence. Any simpler theory, focusing on just one or some of the parts (or on the philosopher away from the art) fails to explain what works of art really are. Bad philosophies of aesthetics give one part of this ecosystem too much independence. Credit the enjoyer too much and you get subjectivistic and relativistic theories. Credit the artwork too much and you get a kind of formalism and objectivism where there is only one 'right' way to 'get' an artwork. Credit the artist too much and you start a hopeless quest for the artist's real 'intention'. Art criticism, and philosophy of art, must aim at understanding the entire culture of art, the art ecosystem.

9. Art as Humanistic Technology

Art is a technology of cultural communing and communication. The medium of art is the artwork. But art depends on aesthetics and artistry. There are three descriptive theories needed: a psychology of aesthetics, an anthropology of artistry, and a philosophy of art. These three theories in turn supply information needed for three evaluative theories: an axiology of the aesthetic (how aesthetics is valuable), pedagogy of artistry (how artistry can be improved), and art criticism (how well artworks achieve their aims).

aesthetics: arouses special experiences (focuses attention, fascination)
 nature by itself can be aesthetic; so can random subjective experience
 humans naturally appreciate and try to repeat aesthetics
 aesthetics can have an indicative mode by being “about” other experiences

artistry: arouses shared aesthetics (guides attention towards intended features)
 deliberate design of features/behavior of things to arouse aesthetics
 artistry can rise to the level of symbolism (this is the origin of iconography,
 music, and written language)
 artistry can have an indicative mode by being about other things

artwork: arouses shared communication (uses artistry to focus attention on an object/situation)
 deliberate artistry to design a thing/situation for communal attention
 artwork can be about anything, including aesthetics, artistry, or symbolism
 (aesthetics: a painting of pure black; artistry: making a miniature teapot;
 symbolism: about anything in culture, people, or other art)
 if about symbolism, an artwork can communicate with audience
 if about art, an artwork can additionally do art criticism or philosophy of art

can be about	aesthetic	artistry	artwork
this mode			
aesthetic	Can indicate other aesthetic experiences	Can resemble features of artistry	Can resemble features of artistry on artworks
artistry	Can have axiological mode when artistry is about aesthetic: show value of some experience	Can have pedagogical mode when artistry is about artistry: show value of some artistic technique	Can resemble artistry on artwork
artwork	Can have axiological mode when art is about aesthetic: communicate value of some experience	Can have pedagogical mode when art is about artistry: communicate value of some technique	Can have critical mode when art is about art: communicate value of some art mode or movement. If in a context of a tradition of art criticism, it can also rise to philosophy of art.