

Art and Value

1. What is the value of contemporary art?

What is the point of asking this question?

- To *justify* the existence of art institutions.
- To *critique* the character of the institutions we have.

It's important to understand that any account of the *value* of contemporary art that's indexed to the interests of these institutions can't play this critical role, and so can't be expected to play a justificatory role either.

Any account of what contemporary art *is* that indexes it to institutional validation precludes a satisfactory account of its value. This means that, in order to ask about the value of contemporary art, we have no choice but to ask about its *essence*.

The problem here is not simply that contemporary art is difficult to define, but that this difficulty concerns its fraught relationship with its essence. Contemporary art is haunted by the question of what it is, sometimes obsessed by it and sometimes outright hostile to it, but never truly free from it.

'Contemporary art' is less a name for a genre of *works* than for the corresponding practices of *creating* and *appreciating* such works. It is the terminus of a historical process of self-definition, through which these practices liberated themselves from the confines of *craft* – as propaganda, decoration, or entertainment – and differentiated themselves from the broader range of *arts* – such as literature, music, and theatre. It is what is left after the era of *modern art*, after the collapse of the barriers between *mediums*, and after the exhaustion of purely *conceptual art*.

However, these determinations – *post-modern*, *post-medium*, and *post-conceptual* – are almost entirely negative. They distinguish, but they don't define. They nevertheless point to the impasse reached by the process of self-definition: in the process of freeing artists from the constraints imposed by existing mediums, conceptual art transmuted the *modernist tendency* to explore these constraints within the mediums themselves, into the *contemporary tendency* to explore the nature of art through art itself.

The problem with this is its own essential premise: *art is not a medium*. It's not possible to experimentally explore the constitutive constraints of those practices named 'contemporary art' in the same way one can within a given medium, because there aren't any constraints that can't be transgressed in the name of 'art'. The constant threat of *performative transgression* thus reduces the historical process of self-definition to the perpetual affirmation of autonomy. This is the impasse of contemporary art.

It's not entirely surprising that some mistake this impasse for a positive definition. For such people, contemporary art is defined by its **freedom to experiment** and to insist on anything else is to curtail this freedom. To quote Joseph Kosuth: "Art's only claim is for art. Art is the definition of art."

However, if contemporary art is nothing but the enactment of its own autonomy, then it can't but be indexed to its institutions and their history, in such a way that these can't be criticised or justified. The problem is that there seems to be no competing definition that does not simply provide a further opportunity for transgression. The qualifier 'contemporary' does not give us purchase on any concrete temporality that could define art works or practices, it simply announces the perpetual present of the impasse.

If we are to have any hope of answering our original question, we must abandon the qualifier, and ask about art as such: *what is it* and *what is its value*? My aim in the rest of this talk is to show how intimately entwined these questions of essence and value are.

2. What is art?

What does an account of art have to do?

If nothing else, it has to articulate the *continuity* and *discontinuity* between art and:

- Nature: sublime vistas, awesome skies, and the many wonders of plants, animals, and human life.
- Craft: elegant decoration, forceful rhetoric, and the many pleasures of fashion, gastronomy, and similar practices.

History

The earliest accounts of art in the Western tradition identify it as the peculiar craft of *mimesis*, or the imitation of nature. This makes what distinguishes art works from other artifacts precisely what they share with the natural things they represent. This account faced two problems:

- It does not actually explain what is shared by art and nature, or why it is valuable.
- It becomes increasingly irrelevant as the non-representational elements of art come to be appreciated on their own terms.

Its most obvious successor is the idea of art as the craft of *expression*. On this account art reflects the *internal life* of the artist rather than the *external state* of the world, understood in terms of feelings, character, and sometimes simply will. This creates a strict discontinuity between art and nature, but in doing so it gives art its own distinctive value: **the cultivation of self-understanding**. This essentially *humanist* account of art and its value is largely responsible for the continuity between ‘fine art’ (e.g., painting and sculpture) and the broader range of ‘arts’ (including literature, music, theatre and cinema). However, it faces its own problems:

- It ignores previous examples of obviously mimetic art.
- It becomes increasingly irrelevant as non-expressive forms of art are deliberately cultivated.

Aesthetics and Semantics

Following the dominance of *mimesis* and *expression*, our understanding of the essence of art has been split between two competing pictures: I’ll call these the *aesthetic model* and the *semantic model*. The central difference between these two models concerns the nature of appreciation: in the aesthetic model, the work is supposed to *stimulate* a sensory or emotional response, whereas in the semantic model, the work is supposed to *communicate* a message of some kind. The consequence of this is a difference on the side of creation: in the aesthetic model, the artist aims to design an effective *form*, whereas in the semantic model, the artist aims to articulate a significant *content*.

This distinction hides a great deal of variation, with many otherwise opposed theories falling on the same side of the divide. The aesthetic model includes the perennial view of aesthetic taste as an immediate source of sensory pleasure, alongside the formalist concern with the technicalities of aesthetic composition, and the myriad champions of intensities of feeling beyond mere pleasure, from sublime awe to visceral disgust. The semantic model includes the traditional view of artistic value as an immediate source of religious, moral, or even political understanding, alongside anti-

formalist revivals of subjective expression, and the originators, defenders, and inheritors of the tradition of conceptual art.

The crucial problem with the aesthetic model is that it ultimately fails to distinguish art from craft, differentiating it from decoration, entertainment, and propaganda only by means of the types sensation and emotion it aims to induce, but for which it has no principled criterion. As articulated by figures such as Joseph Kosuth and Arthur Danto, it fails precisely insofar as it's unable to incorporate those cases of *nakedly conceptual* art that effectively enacted art's secession from craft, most famously Duchamp's *Fountain*. Whatever minimal aesthetic character these possess is entirely insufficient to distinguish them as works of art, and their acceptance as art thus demands that we recognise a dimension of art orthogonal to sensation and feeling, namely, *meaning*.

The corresponding problem with the semantic model is that it ultimately fails to distinguish art from other forms of communication, not just from poetry and literature, but equally from journalism and philosophy. Art refuses any constraints on the types of message it can convey, and this makes it impossible to distinguish art from other forms of communication on the basis of its content alone. As explained by figures such as Susan Sontag and Gilles Deleuze, what comes to define art in the absence of aesthetic forms is not so much the meaning communicated by the work but the practices of *interpretation* through which it is retrieved, practices which, for all their theoretical armaments, are essentially distinguished by the particular historical community to which they belong.

It's the critical deadlock between these models that produces the *institutional approaches* with which we began. It dissolves the problems of the previous models by asserting a radical discontinuity between art and everything else. The idea that art is autonomous becomes the idea that art is *sui generis*.

Nominalism

Let's consider one of the most influential institutional theories of art: Thierry de Duve's nominalism. Du Duve introduces this theory by taking the perspective of an alien anthropologist trying to interpret the meaning of the word 'art'.

He upholds Duchamp's *Fountain* as representative of the impossibility of any such interpretation, insofar as it *constitutively* refuses any classificatory grouping with other examples from the history of art. On this basis he proposes a *nominalist* theory, in which the word 'art' has no meaning over and above the gesture through which we choose to name things as art.

What this means is that the meaning of the word is determined by the role it plays in an ongoing cultural conversation in which we dispute its applicability, **articulating the possibilities** of artistic practice by producing, analysing, and integrating novel examples. It is this conversation that is conserved and curated by the artworld and its institutions.

I propose to invert du Duve's perspective and use it against itself. I'm going to take a specific example: consider the signs of a possible alien megastructure surrounding KIC 8462852, also known as Tabby's star. We might propose several reasons why an alien civilisation would build such a thing, including for energy, for habitation, to signal their existence to other such civilisations, or all of the above.

But what if it is a work of art, either in addition to these other reasons, or entirely on its own terms?

It seems that we can make sense of such a suggestion without knowing anything about this civilisation, its sensory and intellectual capacities, its history, or its institutions. The important

question is: why does this make sense? I think that this has something to do with the nature of value itself.

In suggesting that this epic structure is a work of art, we imply that it was in some sense a work performed *for its own sake*. There is something about the actual performance of the act that exceeds the content of its idea. In this we see a fundamental connection between art and value that cannot be effaced.

On the one hand, there are always more possibilities than we can realize, and the choice to realize some rather than others, even conceived as an experimental process of chance and refinement, implicitly commits itself to the value of those that are chosen.

On the other, the form of value this performance commits itself to can't be reduced to *use value*, *exchange value*, nor any notion of *economic value*. This excess is precisely what is indicated by the phrase 'for its own sake'.

Du Duve's mistake is opposing *nomination* to *classification*, when the use of the word 'art' is at heart a matter of *evaluation*. What is required is a description of the specific kind of value that it is concerned with.

3. What is value?

In trying to identify the form of value specific to art we need to distinguish it from other forms of value in the vicinity:

- From economic values such as *utility* and *price*.
- From epistemic values such as *truth* and ethical values such as *goodness*.
- From subjective values such as *personal preference*.

Nevertheless, we need to understand what all of these have in common. We need to describe the *genus* of value as such if we are to describe the *species* of value that distinguishes art. The key idea is this: *value is what provides reasons for action*.

If you are stuck in a burning gallery and can only save one work, *all else being equal*, you should save the *most valuable*.

The question is whether we can make sense of reasons why a work could be most valuable that would have such consequences for action, independently of other concerns. These reasons must be:

- Formally: *non-instrumental* and *intersubjective*.
- Substantively: motivations for both the *creation* and *appreciation* of art works.

The traditional name for this sort of value, in contrast to truth and goodness, is *beauty*.

4. What is beauty?

History

There are two sides to the traditional concept of beauty: beauty as *value* and beauty as *quality*. The former can still be seen in expressions like 'what a beautiful goal' or 'that is a beautiful instrument', and the latter in the use of 'attractive', 'pretty', and 'pleasant' as synonyms for 'beautiful'.

These two senses have been intertwined at least since the origin of aesthetics as a discipline, when the concept of *taste* combined traditional Greek concerns regarding the nature of *excellence* with early modern concerns regarding the character of *experience*.

However, when artists began to reject the aesthetics of the beautiful in the early 20th century, rediscovering the aesthetics of the sublime, and exploring a wider range of experiential qualities such as the uncanny, the shocking, and even the disgusting, the language of beauty as a distinct form of value was rejected along with it.

This is in part responsible for the additional weight that the term 'art' has acquired, as distinct from the 'arts' and the 'crafts' they had already split from, insofar as it is increasingly needed not just to *name* a range of specific practices and objects but to *evaluate* their worth, independently of whether they exemplify classical traits such as symmetry, harmony, or pleasantness.

This is in turn responsible for reframing the idea that art is 'for its own sake', replacing the disinterestedness of beauty *qua* value with the autonomy of art *qua* practice. This obsession with practical autonomy then fuels the idea that art is *sui generis*.

Essence

It's worth addressing another prominent objection to the notion of beauty, namely, the *anti-essentialist* complaint that it is inherently parochial, for instance, upholding the attractiveness of naked European women above all else. It's useful to pursue the parallel between goodness and beauty in responding to this objection.

It's obvious that different cultures have different ideas about which actions are good, but this presupposes that there is something about which they disagree, namely, goodness. Similarly, we might have different ideas about which things are beautiful, but there are still things that can be said about what we're disagreeing about, namely, beauty.

Definition

I think that it is possible to provide a definition of beauty as a *genus* of value within which we can distinguish several distinct, but compatible *species*. This will enable us to distinguish art from craft and nature while acknowledging its continuity with both, by describing the particular species of beauty that art exemplifies in contrast with them.

This definition has a *formal* and a *substantive* component.

- Formally: beauty can be understood as **unconditional value**. This means that it provides reasons for action that are in some sense independent of other motivations such as personal desires or common purposes. This defines beauty as what is valued for its own sake.
- Substantively: beauty can be understood as the **enhancement of freedom**. This means that these reasons derive from the expansion of our possibilities for action and satisfaction, enabling new desires and purposes, rather than satisfying existing ones.

To see how this works, it's useful to break beauty down into its principal species.

There is a philosophical disagreement about whether beauty is essentially *interested* or *disinterested* running back at least as far as Plato, but more famously represented by Hume and Kant's opposing theories of aesthetic judgment. I think that the two sides in this debate are in fact talking about distinct kinds of beauty: the beauty of craft and the beauty of art, or *relatively* and *absolutely*

unconditional value.

Craft

Relatively unconditional value encapsulates the range of concerns which I earlier called *excellence*. It is value that *exceeds* some given range of desires or purposes, but which is nevertheless relative to them. It occurs when something is better than it needs to be according to some existing practices. This can be understood as the enhancement of concrete forms of freedom. What I mean by this is that the beauty of craft consists in its ability to generate new practical possibilities that *transcend* its initial aims.

This includes everything from the simple provision of unexpected sensuous satisfaction (e.g., a meal that is creatively seasoned), through the extension of existing practices (e.g., a musical instrument with a greater range or precision of play), to the constitution of entirely original modes of living (e.g., the design of a new medium for social interaction). This is demonstrated nowhere better than in the contemporary craft of computer programming. Talk to any programmer for long enough about their code and they'll inevitably bring up questions of beauty, freely contrasting 'elegant solutions' and 'ugly hacks', and deploying a homegrown aesthetic language of surprising subtlety. However, what is most apposite about this aesthetics is the central role played by *extensibility*, or the ability of code to be expanded upon or transposed into new contexts for novel purposes. In essence, its beauty lies in the as yet unexplored opportunities it enables.

Art

What is unique about the beauty of art is precisely that it is not relative to an existing set of practices and their associated desires and purposes. The question is how to understand this absolute unconditionality in terms of the enhancement of freedom. To make sense of this we need to return to the deadlock between aesthetics and semantics.

The truth in the aesthetic model lies in its fidelity to *stimulation*, and the truth in the semantic model lies in its fidelity to *cognition*. The error of the aesthetic model is its focus on the *non-cognitive* dimension of stimulation, and the error of the semantic model is its focus on the *communicative* dimension of cognition. The simple truth about the purpose of art that has been revealed by the history of art's struggle to define itself is the minimal condition of contemporary art: *that it make us think*.

If craft concerns itself with *excellence*, then art concerns itself with *inspiration*. It does not aim to satisfy existing desires and communicate existing ideas, but to stimulate the production of new desires and ideas. It aims to expand our horizons of possibility in a way that cannot be anticipated in advance, and thus cannot be restricted to a given domain of theory or practice. Art is less about the freedom to experiment than it is about **experimentation with freedom**.

If craft aims at the *local* enhancement of freedom, then art aims at the *global* enhancement of freedom. However, because the structure of our collective horizon of possibility is essentially social, the task of expanding it in a global manner demands its own *social infrastructure*. This is why art has emerged as a distinctive practice tied to absolutely unconditional value. The purpose of the institutional framework of contemporary art is to constitute and maintain the **social imagination**. It is on this basis that these institutions must be critically assessed.

Infrastructure

Finally, it is worth showing that this notion of infrastructure can account for the value of *cultivating*

self-understanding emphasised by expressionism and the value of *articulating the possibilities* of artistic practice emphasised by the institutional approach.

On the one hand, if we are to engage with the global horizon of freedom we must understand ourselves and each other as free. Expression maintains the mutual recognition that the social imagination requires.

On the other hand, if we are to preserve and build upon our understanding of what is possible, then we must record, analyse, and appreciate those exemplary works that trace the contours of the possibility space. Articulation maintains the cultural and historical consciousness that the social imagination requires.

To close then, the critical question our institutions face is whether this infrastructural dimension of contemporary art has begun to overshadow the true source of its value, the undefined work of freedom.