

Aesthetic Investigations

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Art and Human Interaction

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Abstract: In this Editor's column I discuss certain fruits and limits of applying the notion of 'performance' to works of art. Art works can be viewed as performances, the public furnishing of works' final form. Concerts can be viewed as performances of a work scored by someone else, the composer, but not all arts are double in this sense. Moreover, art can be viewed as mirroring the psychological, phenomenological and rhetorical aspects of human interaction, which exemplify the way people scrutinise moral situations. Not all performances are artistic, let alone art.

I. A SUITABLE SPECTATOR

The aesthetic situation within art practice, involves the psychological, phenomenological and rhetorical factors at work in the appreciation of a work of art. First, there is the rhetorics of a work's affecting the spectator with its meanings – not just its message, even if there is one. The work is decisive but it is the spectator who has the appreciative experience, whence the importance of what it is like to engage in the appreciation, the phenomenological factors. And, lastly, the psychological factors: why did the artist make the work in this manner, and how do we, the spectators, retrieve the work's psychological reality as it surfaces in the work?¹ We bring the work to life, by not treating it as merely an object, and do this, among others, by mobilising our own history of experiences and suitably projecting it for the sake of empathising with the work.² 'The task of criticism is the reconstruction of the creative process, where the creative process must in turn be thought of as something not stopping short of, but terminating on, the work of art itself.'³

1. According to Richard Wollheim, ‘A suitable spectator is a spectator who is suitably sensitive, suitably informed, and, if necessary, suitably prompted’.⁴ In this characterisation Wollheim deals with the permeability of seeing to thought. I remember Documenta 7 in Kassel, Germany, in 1982, with Rudi Fuchs as its artistic director. Fuchs juxtaposed works by different artists in a room together, instead of showing a single artist per room as is traditionally done to present the development in the artist’s oeuvre. He made us notice the similarities and contrasts between works of different artists, in different styles. I paid more attention to the works and their properties than I would otherwise. The works prompted one to ever new elements. But, if promptings can be suitable, they can also be unsuitable by asking us to consider something that is not really there – where, as Wollheim formulates it, we ‘[refuse] to force upon the picture something that it doesn’t represent’.⁵ There was no risk of unsuitable prompts in Documenta 7 as the prompting were left to the spectator to make. Spectators were nudged, not forced. Nice.

2. If a curator would change the light in a room from white to brown or blue, this would probably distort the viewing conditions in such a way that the viewer can no longer suitably appreciate the works in the room. The light might prompt the viewer to notice things they would never have noticed in white light, but this would distort the work. Changes at a remove from neutral viewing conditions prompt wrongly. If curating were an art form, what would be the proper regard for an audience to appreciate a work of curator art, say, an exhibition?⁶ The artistic procedure of curating would consist in creating an environment that shows the exhibited works favourably – transparent to the works as the artist meant them to be experienced by suitable spectators.

The criteria of success for instances of an art form are normally gleaned from masterworks, that is, works that abide by the relevant procedures and show by themselves how an audience would most fruitfully appreciate them.⁷ But what would a masterwork in this curating art form be, other than an exhibition that set *itself* aside for the sake of allowing the audience to fully concentrate on the exhibited works, instead of thinking about the curating – or one that would, by drawing attention to itself, lure spectators in, who would subsequently concentrate fully to the works? Is curating as an art not a contradiction in terms?

3. There is much of interest in Rembrandt’s *Woman Bathing in a River*, 1654 – the woman most probably is Hendrickje Stoffels (see fig. 1). The dark forest in the background, Hendrickje’s dress which *you can see* is cotton, the cheekiness of the way she lifts her dress, the nakedness of her legs – erotic, but not pornographic, intimate – and her look. What is she looking at? She does not appear to be staring absentmindedly at *nothing*, is she? Her look seems to rest on some object, but she is not actively engaged with it – the object merely fixes the direction of her gaze somewhat. Hendrickje’s interest is with something else – with someone else, with the painter, Rembrandt. Did



Figure 1: Rembrandt, *Woman Bathing in a River*, 1654

Rembrandt see this look in her expression or did he construe it by painting? I am convinced that Hendrickje had the look in her face, and that Rembrandt noticed it, rather than forging it *ex nihilo*, so to speak, because an expression like that – any facial expression – is too subtle and personal to make it up. But then what did he notice, and how did he reproduce it onto the canvas? By a repeated recognition, seeing that her gaze on the canvas fits what he noticed earlier? Wittgenstein comes to our aid.

‘Think of the recognition of *facial expressions*. Or of the description of facial expressions – which does not consist in giving the measurements of the face! Think, too, how one can imitate a man’s face without seeing one’s own in the mirror.’⁸

The reciprocity in Hendrickje’s look and Rembrandt’s recognition of it must have guided his painting. We see something similar in self-portraits painted after the mirror. In the mirror we see the only person who cannot look at us. We see this in self-portrait after self-portrait. Likewise, in Hendrickje’s facial expression we see her happy recognition of being looked at by Rembrandt – scrutinised and painted all in good humour.

The audience appreciates a work by bringing it to life through attentive engagement with it – it makes sense to understand this as somehow giving the work its final form, if it weren’t for the fact that this is not shared or shareable beyond the prompts one derives from it. We are not, thus, performing *the work*, in the sense of giving it another appearance. A musical composition is performed, often – though not necessarily – by others than the composer and this is a necessary ontological step to completion because without sounding the musical work is not complete. Music must be performed, but no single performance is definitive for the work. Performance is necessary, but no particular performance is sufficient. The listener must pay attention to bring the performance further to life in their appreciative experience. Calling auditory appreciation a further performance recognises its importance, but it is not shareable in the way the band’s or orchestra’s performance is. You can share it only by collectively experiencing the music performance.

Did I just now perform *Woman Bathing in a River* in discussing the painting? I don’t think so. All I did was prompt to certain features in Hendrickje’s facial expression, hoping that others will see it this way, as well. It is up to other spectators to assess the suitability of my prompting. This we do by looking at the same object, the painting by Rembrandt, and the way he portrayed his model in it. Rembrandt too, one wants to say, prompts us to certain facets of Hendrickje’s behaviour and presence in the situation. But he did it by painting her, and long before I did. My proposal is, for us to be open to prompts of all sorts – acknowledging the permeability of perception to thought, i.e. recognising the danger of ‘[forcing] upon the picture something that it doesn’t represent’. The suitability of the prompting is in the actual experience of seeing its object.

4. The beauty in all this is the realisation that art mirrors – I am not saying mimics, or represents, as the Rembrandt does – human interaction, in its psychological, phenomenological and rhetorical aspects. The core of being an animal is sharing the world with other members of your species. This is especially clear with the so-called social animals, more so with the moral species of humanity. Humans have devised ethical systems to deal with human interaction. And one wonders what makes morality such a viable undertaking for us, if it weren't for the way we interact, and the power of assessing the other's intentions by looking at them – and by showing one's own intentions to the other. Looking at each other is what defines the human species, and keeps it together.⁹ In the reciprocal practice of looking at one another, the aesthetic facets of interaction, its psychological, phenomenological and rhetorical factors, ground the ethics of human being at home in the world.

This does not mean, or imply, though, that human interaction is art. To be art means to function within art practice, the practice surrounding works in particular art forms, artists, suitable spectators and art institutes, their agency and intentions and the reciprocal feedback mechanisms holding the practice together and forming its set of rules and explanations.

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NOTES

¹Wollheim 1980.

²Wollheim 1993.

³Wollheim 1980, 185.

⁴Wollheim 2001, 13.

⁵Wollheim 2001, 24.

⁶See Levinson 1990 for this notion of 'proper regard'.

⁷See Van Gerwen 2014.

⁸Wittgenstein 1953, 98:285.

⁹Fridlund 1997.

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