

Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics



A Letter to Jeffrey Steele

Author

EDWARD WINTERS

Affiliation

ARTIST/ WRITER/ CRITIC,
FREELANCE
LONDON

Abstract: Letter to Jeffrey Steele

London

27/07/2016

I hope this letter finds you well. As I write it drizzles. I am sitting in a little hippy café just off Highbury Corner where, for some reason beyond my reckoning, they don't serve eggs for breakfast. But they do sell a reasonable white wine from 8 in the morning and the cleaners are in the house and the dog barks, growls and shakes interminably and so I've brought her here for a cheese toastie, a coffee and a bottle of wine. I am glad to be here writing to you.

On Thursday night I went over to the APT gallery in Deptford, where Jo Volley has a beautiful piece, *Time Painting*. It's a panel about the shape and size of a standard dinner plate. Its back is painted fluorescent orange so that after a few moments you begin to notice the halo effect that comes off the white wall behind. The surface is an even pale (very pale) grey-green. Jo has been researching a history of pigments and so she has come across a wide and wonderful range of colours extracted from all sorts of places. The surface of Jo's painting is phosphorescent. I can only imagine its transformation as day gives way to night. It seems to me like having your own personal moon. But is it painting? If not, then what?



Figure 1: Jo Volley, Time Painting, 2016

I've been reading and enjoying Cavell, including, 'Kierkegaard's *On Authority and Revelation*'. This essay marks, as far as I can tell, his first reference to 'fraudulence'. It reappears in 'Music Discomposed' and then later in, 'A Matter of Meaning It'.¹ In each essay he uses it to mark a symptom of the modern; but says this is a condition for all art. In the first essay, he asks, 'What would it take for us moderns to acknowledge that a man had undergone a revelation—for us to accept that the man's account had *authority*? So authority is what we have to look for in the face of a claim such as Adler's. (Pastor Adolph Peter Adler claimed to have received a revelation. After some interrogation, Adler was subsequently dismissed from his pastoral duties. And so he was considered a fraud.) Cavell counterposes fraudulence with trust and, at least on my reading, he claims that in our encounters with modern art, we have to contend with this possibility—that a work of modern art calls upon our trust but risks our being the subjects of an experience lacking authenticity.

In 'Music Discomposed' Cavell raises the question: What qualifies an object or event as a work of art? Cavell takes two contemporary music theory journals. ('Music Discomposed' was first published in 1967.) These journals concerned themselves with the new music and their articles were written by musicians and critics. Cavell is sniffy about their academic credentials:

One comes to realise that these professionals themselves do not quite know who is and who is not rightly included among their

peers, whose work counts and whose does not. No wonder then, that we outsiders do not know. And one result clearly communicated by these periodicals is that there is no obvious way to find out.

What they suggest is that the possibility of fraudulence, and the experience of fraudulence, is endemic in the experience of contemporary music; that its full impact, even its immediate relevance, depends upon a willingness to trust the object, knowing that the time spent with its difficulties may be betrayed. I do not see how anyone who has experienced modern art can have avoided such experiences, and not just in the case of music. Is Pop Art art? Are canvases with a few stripes or chevrons on them art? [...] A familiar answer is that time will tell. But my question is: What will time tell? [...] But in waiting for time to tell that, we miss what the present tells—that the dangers of fraudulence, and of trust, are essential to the experience of art.²

[...] “the threat of fraudulence,” [is] something I take to be endemic to modern art.³

So Cavell uses modernism as a lens through which to focus upon art more generally. Something similar occurs in Wollheim. Painting puts us in touch with the surface so that it insists upon our attention in the appropriate experience. But then he says this tells us something about the activity of painting throughout its history as a *medium*. We should always have taken account of the surface in our appropriate experiences of it.

Both Wollheim and Cavell take the artist to be a singular figure whose quest in making art is a calling. Kierkegaard, as you know, prefigured the existentialists whose notion of *mauvaise foi* (most often translated as ‘bad faith’) is equivalent to Cavell’s notion of fraudulence. So from Kierkegaard, Cavell adopts the view that an artist is a seer, whose specific vision is solitary and whose work is uniquely his own. For Wollheim, the artist is someone whose calling is to realise a self through his art. When he successfully does this, he has developed his own style; and style is the mark of, in Cavell’s term, an authentic artist. We can trust him. He is an authentic voice in this precarious age of idle gossip and other forms of frippery.

His attack on formalism aims at New Writing in literary theory and the various essays coming out in support of the new music. But I can see how this is easily extrapolated to form a criticism of the kind of formalist work that includes yours. Two things strike me as possible rejoinders. First, Cavell takes a Wittgensteinian swipe at the New Criticism, which insists upon speaking of the work alone, and nothing beyond the work. Any talk of the artist’s intention, conceived of as separate from, and independent of, the work is immediately ruled out as beyond the remit of the formalist critic. In ‘A Matter of Meaning It’, he cites the essay, ‘The Intentional Fallacy’, a seminal

piece by Wimsatt and Beardsley.⁴ If we think of intentions as being mental objects that cause works but which are independent of them, then intentions do not show up in the work. But Cavell, quite rightly in my opinion, argues against any such notion of intention.

One familiar resolution has been to commend the artist's remarks, and his audience's responses, to the attention of psychologists or sociologists, confining philosophy's attention to "the object itself." . . . The plausibility of this resolution has strong sources. . . [one of which is] . . . the realisation on the part of anyone who knows what art is that many of the responses directed to works of art are irrelevant to them as art and that the artist's intention is always irrelevant—it no more counts toward the success or failure of a work of art than the artist intended something other than is there, than it counts, when the referee is counting over a boxer, that the boxer had intended to duck. I cannot accept such a resolution. . . .⁵

In 'A matter of Meaning It', the boxing analogy moves from the counted out to the winning punch. Cavell is trying to show the range of things that show up in a work that help to identify the artist's intention. And he does this, in part, by making the analogy with our behaviour and its interpretation outside of art. He quotes 'The Intentional Fallacy',

One must ask how the critic expects to get an answer to the question about intention. How is he to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem—for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem.⁶

Cavell goes on to criticise this view:

It is still worth saying about such remarks that they appeal to a concept of intention as relevant to art which does not exist elsewhere: in, for example, the case of ordinary conduct, nothing is more visible than actions which are not meant, visible in the slip, the mistake, the accident, the inadvertence [...] and by what follows (the embarrassment, confusion, remorse, apology, attempts to correct [...]) Of course we may not know what is happening in a given case: the boxer who connects and wins may have meant to miss and throw the fight. We may have to go outside the punch itself to find this out [...] but then there is no question what kind of evidence will be relevant.⁷

Intentions do indeed show up in the work and it is the work of the critic to identify, by contextual evidence, just what does show up as relevant. Leave

that aside. The Wittgensteinian conception of intention need not concern you. What you need to stave off Cavell's criticism is a view of work that is in some sense objective—that calls upon external structures for its content and coherence. It is your intention to call upon the spectator to acknowledge her recognition of mathematical and other systematic organisation that lie beyond her (and your) subjectivity. It is an odd thing about mathematics—that it seems to lie 'out there' in the world; but where? Similarly, Wittgenstein on colour: we cannot conceive of two specs of colour, each different, occupying the same region of our visual field. And that seems to be something like a necessary truth. But why? Colour seems to have its own logic. And you work on that; and without the faintest whiff of *mauvaise foi*. Of course, what you have renounced, along with others in the constructivist tradition, is the use of paint to create an appearance of a three-dimensional world that belies the fact of the surface upon which the paint is spread. Now, a question both Cavell and Wollheim address is: What is an art medium? What is it for something to belong to an art kind?

What I found very interesting about Cavell is the presaging of an argument lately thought out by Dominic McIver Lopes in his, *Beyond Art*.⁸ Both Wollheim and Cavell argue that works of art fall into art kinds—music, poetry, architecture, painting, sculpture, dance, theatre, the novel, et cetera. And it is assumed by both that if anything is a work of art, then it belongs to at least one art kind—I take it that opera and ballet belong to theatre and music, perhaps literature too. Lopes formalises this and introduces what he calls his 'buck passing' theory. The theory is developed to deal with the 'hard cases'. These are the cases giving rise to the question, 'But is it art?' or, more generally, to get us to rethink our assumptions: 'What is art?'

The avant-garde has put forward works that have challenged the traditional conception of what art is. Their works are intended to do this. And two strategies have been developed to deal with the problem arising from these cases. The first is to say that we need to redefine our conception of art. The second is to say these cases lie at the edges of art—at its frontiers. So that avant-garde art is seen to push back the boundaries of what is acceptable as art, and so on. But this view tries to answer a question concerning the nature of art, and not of the individual art kinds. The buck passing theory does not countenance any such general theory and claims that its passing the buck to the individual art kinds is better equipped to handle the hard cases.

Wollheim writes extensively on painting. As such he is concerned primarily with the question, 'What is painting?' Concerned, that is, with providing an account of central examples of the art kind and providing, if possible, necessary and sufficient conditions for a thing's counting as a painting. In so doing, he develops a theory of the medium of painting. He speaks of the surface of a painting being worked by the artist so that representational effects show up on the canvas. (His view of representation is developed out of a theory of depiction taken broadly. Pictures are surfaces in which representa-

tional content can be experienced by the spectator. Out of this he develops a twofold theory of depiction, so that we have complex experiences which combine features of the flat surface in which content can be seen. Importantly, Wollheim explicitly denies that representation is to be conceived in terms of illusion.) Paintings are works of art whose tradition provides a context in which we look for hand-made pictorial experiences. In looking at the flat surface we see there the marks made within a representational medium and understand them as intended by the artist to afford these further pictorial effects.

However, this delineation of what is included has consequences for what is ruled out,

[T]here may, as an extreme case, be surfaces which could not be the surfaces of paintings because (we are sure) there could be no intention which would justify a painting having one of them as its surface. I am inclined to think this about the black canvases of Ad Reinhardt: assuming these, that is, to belong to art, and not to art-history.⁹

On this view all sorts of abstract paintings are ruled in, for these too have depth ‘seen-in’ the flat surface; and so the twofold experience required by painting is secured—Rothko, Louis, and others who paint pictures in which spatial depth is intended to be experienced. (I don’t think systems could be included. Nor do I think, as it stands could Jo’s lovely little circular work at APT.) If they are not paintings, perhaps they are something else.

Lopes’ theory claims there is no unified system of the arts. And so there is nothing to explain why this object is an art object other than that it belongs to an art kind. Art is just painting and sculpture and dance and film and architecture, et cetera.

What motivates Lopes’ theory is the impasse we have reached in aesthetics in dealing with the hard cases. What Lopes calls the ‘hard cases’ are works by artists that defy the definitions of art that have been held central. So, notoriously, Duchamp’s *Fountain* is used as the standard model—the Dada movement’s anti-rational procedures stand as the first occasion of works that were meant to challenge tradition rather than subvert or reinterpret. The twentieth century avant-garde is then littered with works that fly in the face of any philosophical definition of what art is. Thus such art became philosophical in itself, its works designed to combat any definition philosophers might argue. Hence the brilliance of Dickie and then Danto with their various versions of the Institutional Theory. The institutional theories variously posit that x is a work of art if x has bestowed upon it the status of a work of art by all or most or a specified substantial body with institutional authority (the ‘Artworld’).

Lopes does not let himself off lightly. He picks up a yet more problematic case than *Fountain*. He chooses as his example, Robert Barry’s *Inert Gas*

Series. The work isn't perceptible. Its only form, exhibited in the galleries and collected by wealthy moderns, is the documented evidence of the release of the various gases. And so with this in mind we have now to locate the work. It is in the face of these questions—What is the work? and when we settle upon its identity, Is it a work of art?—that we find ourselves spinning vertiginously out of control.

What better explains the hard cases is his buck passing theory. We must ask, if Barry's *Inert Gas Series* is a work of art, passing the buck, to what art kind does it belong? It is a feature of art kinds that they have media profiles. Paintings are not just made of paint. They are made in the medium of paint. Arguably (Wollheim) that medium constrains paintings to have representational properties; and the exploitation of the medium to render representational effects calls upon the spectator to see not only the represented world but the way the medium is exploited to bring about that depicted world. So if Barry's gas works are works of art they do not belong to the art kind painting. Then what are they? Now, just as art kinds can die, so new art kinds can be brought into existence.

The art of illuminating manuscripts is all but dead. By contrast, photography, video, film, installation, performance art, sound art, and so on are relative newcomers; and at present they thrive. Wollheim does not think that anything made with coloured paint is a painting. The material is not the medium. Lopes writes that the ceramic slip used by manufacturers of coffee mugs is the same slip used by ceramic artists. The stuffs are the same in each case. Then what makes a painting and a ceramic piece by Picasso works of art whilst a painted scene illustrating courtroom proceedings and a coffee mug are not? The view is that in the former, but not the latter cases, the material is recruited to a medium. (Lopes calls this a medium profile.) It is the medium profile (for any art) that prescribes the nature of belonging to which any work must conform.

When we encounter a putative work such as *Fountain*, we must ask, to what art kind does this belong? In the absence of a candidate art kind, it looks as if we are faced with the problem of either withdrawing its art status or conceding its 'free agent' status. That is, either *Fountain* is not a work of art or it is a work of art that belongs to no art kind: a free agent. Lopes' ingenious strategy is to remind us of the newness of many art kinds. One way to deal with *Fountain*, and indeed Lopes' strategy for dealing with the hard cases, is to consider the work as a prototypical work in a new medium profile. Exhibited in 1917, the work has now become embedded within the art kind, conceptual art, a movement that had its heyday in the sixties and seventies. Nevertheless, time has told that *Fountain* belongs within that body of work—specifically as a prototype.

I now return to Jo Volley's *Time Painting*. Is it a work of art? I think it is easier to deal with than *Fountain* but that in dealing with it we learn something more about the liberal accommodation afforded by the buck passing

theory. If we take Wollheim's account of the medium profile of painting, then *Time Painting* presents a problem. For no representational effects are offered up by this work. And so, we might think that Wollheim might reiterate his thoughts about Reinhardt's *Black Paintings*. But *Time Painting* draws upon the history of Volley's own work—and certainly *Daffodils* is a painting in Wollheim's terms. *Time Painting* lacks an essential feature of the medium profile of painting. It lacks representational content; and so one of the two folds that Wollheim sharply delineated is absent, and in its absence we no longer have any grip upon what the other fold is meant to be doing. The flat surfaces of representational paintings contribute to the complex experience of depiction.

Volley's new work, I want to say, belongs in part to painting, since it draws upon our attention to surface and the kind of prepared surface that artists have learnt to craft. It also belongs to the body of work that includes experimentation and exploitation of materials (in particular the materials used in the medium profile of painting) as they are recruited to providing experiences for the spectator. Its ideas connect up with the medium profile of conceptual art and minimalism, where both these art kinds disengage themselves with the medium profile of painting. And so we locate the medium of this 'painting' by calling upon both the tradition of painting and by calling upon those art kinds that disavow one crucial aspect of painting within the tradition.

Now, whilst Cavell might not include your work as art, I think the strategy used in looking at *Time Painting* is indicative of how your work can be seen as belonging to a hybrid of art kinds, whilst discounting some features of the medium profile of painting, it yet seeks to exploit, for instance, the preparation of the canvas, the making of the paint, the practice of 'pouncing' to mark out the canvas, and so on. Whilst it disregards representation, it nevertheless takes seriously the idea that arithmetical systems and algorithms can generate a content that calls upon the spectator to reflect upon the nature of ourselves as rational creatures. Work on colour that accepts there is a colour space to be understood in terms of a colour geometry—as for instance, in Munsell—shows why it is that these works do not use colour to create pictorial space. Add to this, a connection with the concerns of the conceptualists as they rejected Greenberg's distorted view of aesthetics and the work connects up with other art kinds in ways that provide it with a medium profile in which it can be understood.

The connection between systems art and constructivism is so well established that constructivism, including systems, structuur, art concret, de Stijl, et cetera, and understood as a rejection of representation, ought to be seen as an art kind in itself, derived from painting and sculpture, but independent of both. This seems to me to be a good way of understanding what has happened over the last hundred years in the practice of fine art; and Lopes' account makes room for interdisciplinary work in which history of art, fine art practice, aesthetics and sociological considerations can come together. It is a

pity that the Caracas workshop engendered some acrimony, but perhaps we can see that meeting as a precursor to the conversations we are now having in the philosophy seminars, the art history programmes and in the art schools.

With all best wishes, as ever,

edwardjohnwinters@gmail.com

NOTES

1. Cavell 1976.
2. Cavell 1976, 188–189.
3. Cavell 1976, 176.
4. Wimsatt jr. and Beardsley 1945.
5. Cavell 1976, 181.
6. Quoted in Cavell 1976, 226.
7. Cavell 1976, 226–227.
8. Lopes 2014.
9. Wollheim 1973, 124.

REFERENCES

- Cavell, Stanley. 1976. *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lopes, Dominic McIver. 2014. *Beyond Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wimsatt jr., W. K., and Monroe Beardsley. 1945. “The Intentional Fallacy.” In *The verbal Icon*, edited by W. K. Wimsatt jr., 3–18. Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky.
- Wollheim, Richard. 1973. *On Art and the Mind: Essays and Lectures*. London: Allen Lane.