Aesthetic Investigations
Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics
Special Issue – Arts, Ontology, and Politics

Reviews

Review of Sherri Irvin's *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art* (2022), Oxford: OUP, 269 pp.

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With *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art* (2022), Sherri Irvin does what philosophers do best: they compose true statements. Divided into ten chapters devoted to display compliance/non-compliance, *Immaterial* begins with the question 'Rules in Art?' followed by chapters focused on 'rules of': display, conservation, participation, materials, medium, expression, interpretation, authenticity and finally 'Rules? Really?'. From the outset, Irvin aims for 'constitutive rules' that both constitute and regulate practices, such that

> '[t]he rules of contemporary art constitute artworks and the practices of displaying them; they also regulate how installers, curators, conservators and audience members should engage with the works' [33].

Moreover,

> 'these rules serve to determine what counts as a display of the work, to structure forms of activity for museum professionals and audience members, and to constitute the work's expressive content' [33].

Chapter 8 admits how truly messy this process really is.

What's particularly relevant here for aesthetics is that several of the truths she states counter received views regarding: the ontology of artworks [122-126], in particular conceptual art [9]; visual art medium's reliance on rules

(*support*) [128]; display (in)variability in terms of scale, components and arrangements; the independence of sanction and intention [20], as well as how artists' intentions are produced [185]. Irvin's diverse examples demonstrate how rules addressing display impact both audience experiences and artwork meanings [39]. It's thus incumbent on those charged with performing artworks (*display*) that each instantiation (*occurrence*) elucidates whatever rules inhere [115-117, 177]. Irvin considers rules not only 'part of the *medium* of contemporary art' [58], but 'the public needs access to information that goes beyond what is visible in the display' [63]. Conservator Vivian van Saaze affirms, 'insight into the backstage practices of museum work... is a prerequisite for understanding installation art' [64]. Irvin terms her own approach a variety of *hylomorphism*, since 'some things stand in the relation of *being the matter of* to other things' [120], such that rules sanctioned by artists 'serve as matter for [their] work.'

Plenty of artworld examples ground her challenges to familiar philosophical notions. For example, even as the ontic status of artworks by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Sigalit Landau or Nam June Paik change over time, they remain ontologically stable [15-17, 26]. Since the millennium, aestheticians have debated: artwork completeness properties, posthumous artworks, *authentic* artwork performances, site-specificity, 'work-determinative instructions' [30], duplication/cloning [177], the conservator's role, curatorial interpretations and whether artists' changes to their artworks are *updates* or count as new artworks altogether [108/123]. While knowing the 'rules' erases most of these philosophical problems, knowing how to apply them remains a matter of interpretation [179]. Rather than pursuing these debates, Irvin details countless rules designating how particular artworks are to be handled (displayed, conserved and experienced). Such rules are on a case-by-case basis (unique to an artwork, though not the artist, and sometimes exhibition-specific), so each artwork's medium also includes such immaterial features, as well as their potential to change over time. As Irvin states,

> 'An understanding of the nature of the artwork can offer insight into such cases by helping us to see in what the work's identity consists and what degree of change it can tolerate while still maintaining its identity' [26].

Specific rules rarely exist until articulating them becomes necessary. Irvin notes, 'A rule is in effect if it has been articulated through such a form of activity' [32]. Such immaterial rules typically materialise in the process of organising exhibitions, reinstalling artworks and/or preparing them for storage/shipping. Rules often begin as questions that take the form: 'What should we do if x?' wherein x is something like 'we must deinstall it', 'we want to store it', 'we'd like to reinstall it', 'we have to repair it' or 'we need to ship it to y'.... The first respondent is typically the artist/estate/collector charged with maintaining the artwork. And as Irvin notes, artists (or their

representatives) often prepare careful installation instructions that detail handling, assembly and composition, so as to ensure that eventual presentations resemble those in their mind's eye. Rules accompanying each presentation become part of an artwork's presentational history (*historical individuals*), which is why curators often pour over documentation of prior installations and/or consult artworlders who have installed the artwork elsewhere to grasp what to expect. As conservator Sanneke Stigter notes, the aim is to 'parallel the artist's way of thinking during installation and to be conscious and transparent about the choices that are made, in an attempt to intervene as little as possible' [113]. Periodically reinstalling artworks keeps the process alive in the staff's memory, what Stigter calls 'active conservation treatment' [113].

Irvin offers El Anatsui's large-scale bottle-cap wall hangings, assembled by studio assistants in Ghana, as exemplary of 'nonfixed forms' whose display is left entirely to installers who are invited to ' "sculpt" each metal piece as they install it' [48]. Okwui Enwezor worried that his having associated El Anatsui's objects with 'kente cloth' rather than global art may have prompted displays that present them reverently like African artifacts. One artworld trend Irvin's approach downplays is the rise of 'post-medium' practices [134], whereby artists refuse to make anything, thereby delegating *all* of the artmaking tasks, including 'rule-making' to others.

Given Irvin's prior work on artists' roles in sanctioning their artworks, it is hardly surprising that she attributes artists with making the rules [34]. She adds,

> 'if an institution makes a choice, justified or not, to violate the artist's sanction, this doesn't show either that there is no sanction or that the sanction is irrelevant' [65].

By contrast,

> '[w]here an artist specifies a rule for conservation and the institution agrees to it, sanctioning that rule is part of the artist's artmaking activity, and the rule is part of the structure to which it is appropriate to attribute meaning' [65].

Irvin contrasts Zoe Leonard's not wanting the orange peels of *Strange Fruit* (1992-1997) preserved with Sarah Sze's requesting that her lively sculpture *Migrateurs* (1997) appear 'aged but not neglected' [70]. Sze's wanting decayed elements replaced with new ones and/or replicas suggests that durational perishing diminishes her installations, whereas deteriorated peels, which Leonard sewed while grieving David Wojnarowicz's death, authenticates hers.

To grasp participation rules, Irvin juxtaposes Adrian Piper's *The Probable Trust Registry: The Rules of the Game #1-3* (2013-2017), for which hundreds of signatories have made ethical commitments; Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974), whereby audience members violated her body with one of 72 tools

laid out on a table; and Jill Sigman's *Huts* (ongoing since 2009) that house intimate discussions and gift exchanges. Regarding Abramović's agonistic proposal, Irvin remarks,

> '[A]udience members did not need to be assigned to a specific role or instructed by an authority to perform harmful actions; they simply made these choices on their own, once they were in a situation – the art context – where they understood the usual rules of engagement to be suspended' [84].

She admits that audience members participate even when artists explicitly sanction non-participation:

> 'When audience members know that participation is sanctioned in some works, this destabilizes the longstanding default rule that artworks – particularly those in institutional displays – are sacred, untouchable objects... once people get used to encountering artworks that can be touched, they are tempted to do the same with other works' [93].

Of course, the limiting reagent is always the exhibiting institution, whose capacity to comply with the rules depends on budgets, curatorial imagination, knowledge of an artwork's presentational history and staff capabilities. Conceptual art may save on storage and insurance fees, but its painstaking installation can be costly; paradoxically diminishing its chances of receiving 'active conservation treatment'.

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