

Aesthetic Investigations

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Another Outcry for Artistic Relevance

Author

ROB VAN GERWEN

Affiliation

UNIVERSITY UTRECHT

INTRODUCTION

Works of art are brought to life by their audiences. This is obvious with art forms like theatre, the ballet or music where what the audience does can make or break the performance. But works in other art forms, too, such as film, painting, installation or performance art prosper with an attentive audience and give way under uninterested audiences acting disturbingly. Art is a social practice.¹ Works are made for a suitable audience, which is defined – nominally – as an audience consisting of spectators, listeners, and so on, who attentively experience the works for what these are conveying to them.

The ontology of art can thus be understood as a peculiar rhetoric. There is logos, pathos and ethos in art appreciation, but the mix of these technical means, as Aristotle conceived it, is different in art from more ‘normal’ rhetorical situations where a rhetor tries to convince an audience of something. If a journalistic photo – one such ‘normal’ rhetorical situation – were to actively solicit our emotions (pathos), or if it were prominently conveying the photographer’s point of view (ethos), this could work against its ‘truth’ (logos) – this will indeed figure among the most evident reasons for dismissing a photo in journalism. With a work of art though the question of its truth (logos) does not concern its work-to-world direction of fit, but its work-to-audience direction of fit. Works are judged rather for their ethos and pathos; they are not admired for being true to the world. Of course, logos is more than truth alone, and in that broader sense works may be viewed as *artistically true*, they have meaning and are internally coherent.

Works do not normally convince their spectators of some view, let alone persuade them to do something particular to things outside of the aesthetic situation – excluding all the things audiences must do to bring a work to life. Artists may want such worldly things changed, but do not often confuse the nature of art with that of journalism and propaganda.

ART AND THE ARTIST

Works give people ‘things to consider’ – interpretations of works of art are most often open-ended. This does not mean, however, that spectators can make a work mean anything they want. Of course they can *say* anything, but it will not necessarily be about the work, even when it arose in spectators whilst appreciating it. How, then, does a conversation about a work proceed?

Imagine three people studying *Guernica*. M treats the work as a late Mondrian, another, P, sees it, rightly, as a work by Picasso, and the third, R thinks it is by Rembrandt. M views *Guernica* as proof that Mondrian has lost his ways in a fatal stylistic experiment, P sees it as an expressive commentary on a German-Spanish war-criminal bombarding of the little Basque village of Guernica, and R takes it to be a symptom of some unfathomable psychosis in Rembrandt, say. They are all looking in peculiar ways at one and the same painting, but the one knowing it is a Picasso may make sense of most parts and aspects of the painting.

This counterfactual discussion is not conceived so as to suggest that only P, who sees *Guernica* correctly as a Picasso has a right to talk about the painting, even though in quite a few ways P will be better informed than the others. Yet, R might have interesting things to say about the massive difference in style of *Guernica*'s cubism from Rembrandt's realism – though, as R thinks the painting is by Rembrandt this divergence would make R think badly about this cubist style, because R cannot make sense that this painter (Rembrandt) should decide to paint in this manner. Indeed, R might think Rembrandt was in a state of psychosis when he painted it. Similar ideas might occur in M. Yet, after a while, when the information of the three is aligned with the truths of the matter, their conversation might result in adequate and rich insights in the *Guernica*.

The communicative element in this is not that the majority decides about the artistic merit of a work, but that each viewing experience can bring something to the work's appreciation, which may, but need not, add to the appreciation as long as their prompts are measured against what can be held true about the painting: what can actually be seen in the work, and what we truly know about it and its painter. However, persisting in falsehoods can definitely disturb the appreciative process.²

Norms of aesthetic suitability (for lack of a better word) are connected to what the artist did while making the painting, including their thoughts and feelings about what they did. Knowing who painted the work – and, thus, in

whose oeuvre it is supposed to fit – will instruct one to watch correctly and also, we hope, to see something that is actually there.³ This is in a nutshell what aesthetic normativity consists in.⁴ But perhaps something has changed with contemporary art?

CONCEPTUAL ART

I am sure many think something is different, but I find it difficult to understand just what the change consists in. Allow me to try to understand what might be going on, with four examples.

John Cage introduced random processes to eliminate the artist and their intentions. The composer's audibility presupposes their controlling the performance. In *4'33"* (1952) he even dispensed with the artistic intentions of the performers: a piano player mounts the stage, bows to the audience, opens the piano, puts a score there, and sits still for four minutes and 33 seconds, 'following' the score's three movements. The piece is 'performed' in a music hall, with a music audience, and is flanked with other performances of contemporary music.

Mauricio Kagel only forgoes his own audibility, not that of the performers in *Ludwig van* (1970). The 'score' of this work, published on Beethoven's 200th birthday, consists of photos on music stands spread out in a room, of passages from Beethoven's scores, with the instruction for performers to pick out passages from the photos, and perform them, one after the other. The different performances of *Ludwig van* are incomparable and we cannot possibly hear the input of the composer, who does not control the performance. Only Beethoven does, though not in the way *he* could have possibly intended.

Is *4'33"* a work of music, though? What the audience is hearing are the sounds of members in the audience: everyday sounds with everyday meanings. Some people start talking about the event, some get angry, others stomp out of the music hall. These sounds, Cage seems to be asking us, are to be heard *as music*, but are we capable of that? Perhaps Cage wants to make a deeper philosophical point: that the one central element in music must be that it is musicians who make the sounds, or rather tones, of the music. Would that fit Cage's oeuvre better than the former interpretation? I do not think so. (The latter interpretation is, rather, a philosopher's conclusion.⁵) It is clear that *4'33"* and *Ludwig van* are not traditional works of music – perhaps we must treat them as conceptual art, as a play with definienda of this particular art form – when is music, when is composing? – and an effort to dismiss the role of the artist.

My third example is from Stanley Brouwn's *Project for the Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller* for the Sculpture Garden of the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, in the 1970s. This consisted of ten text plates marking ten starting points for walks he made in the Sculpture Garden, commemorating only the amount of steps he took. When I was confronted with the plates at the



Figure 1: Mauricio Kagel, *Ludwig van*, 1970

time, I was okay with the thought that the plates were art, and wasn't too worried that I had no idea how to appreciate them. But surely these two issues are connected? Recognising that something is art implies knowing how to appreciate them – as art, i.e. as something made, or at least intended by artists.

If I would now ask what the ten plates meant artistically, I would be at a loss. I would have to assume Brouwn actually made these walks so that I could treat the plates as 'true'. But maybe their point was, that I could never know whether he was lying? (Again a philosopher's conclusion?) Indeed here was a work giving me 'things to consider', but what were these things I was to consider? Was there anything to look at? It seemed that I was invited to imagine something – but I was not sure what.

Now take Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*, my fourth example, which I only know from a photo I found on the internet of a chair, and of a photo of a chair, and of a piece of text giving the definition of 'chair'. I remember thinking when I saw this reproduction for the first time, that there was indeed only one chair in the work, the one that one can sit on, and that Plato would certainly have thought only the definition was truly a chair.⁶

HOW TO APPRECIATE CONCEPTUAL ART?

Obviously, conceptual art is not one of the traditional forms of art. Let us now try to explicate the way one appreciate works of this kind most fruitfully



Figure 2: Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965

– and to establish that they are indeed a kind. (I refuse to fall for Dickie’s suggestion that something is art if and because the artist says so.⁷) We need some criterion that shows how works of a certain kind can be experienced most fruitfully – like we have for traditional art forms: paintings are appreciated by looking at the paint on their flat surfaces; sculptures are appreciated from all angles; films are watched on a screen, and listened to, and attention is asked for filling out ellipses, the effects of editing and movements of the camera, and so on. An art form not only instructs artists how to produce an instance of it, but it also shows how an audience is most fruitfully to experience them.

How we learn this is by appreciating masterworks within the art form. This does not mean that only paintings resembling a masterwork count as art works in the form of paintings, but that these masterworks have taught us how to look at works answering to the relevant phenomenological specifications.⁸ Before we can apply the workings of a masterwork to other works, we need some artistic procedure to connect them – some way of working that several artists share (paint on a canvas, say). And then, in order to learn how to appreciate works in that procedure, we need a few masterpieces to show the way (Rembrandts, Raphaels, Cézannes, say).⁹ Do works of conceptual art, such as those I just discussed instantiate a particular procedure? What would it be? ‘Do something within art practice, inviting the audience in some traditional direction, without delivering what they are taught to expect there’? Or is it: ‘Remove all traces of the human origin of works of art.’

But can this be a procedure, something an artist can set out to comply with? If we assume that it can, this may simply be a fashionable way to deal with how we are stuck for an answer, trying hard not to be blunt to artists. Alternatively, it may be an expression of the cleverness conceptual art provides us. But then how should we appreciate these ‘works’? Or has art appreciation lost its meaning and am I barking up the wrong tree? If the procedure invites the audience to think, then the question becomes: How is mere thinking a case of aesthetic appreciation? Are we not merely invited to think philosophically about the limitations of traditional forms of art?

In general, appreciating a work of art means to see, hear, or read it, or, in general: to engage with it in the way invited by the work, in light of its maker’s intentions. ‘Be open to the work – answer to what the work, as made by the artist, seems to be asking of you.’ This view does not require spectators to first assemble the artist’s intentions – independent of what the work asks one to do – nor does it imply the view that the artist is in full control of all details of the work or their meaning. We may not even be thinking about the author much, just holding them responsible for the nature of the work – their intentionality is the condition of possibility for making sense of a work.¹⁰

Formalism and abstraction – flanked by Dadaism and Duchampian ready-mades – can be viewed as the first steps in an effort to attribute the meaning of a work to the object itself, irrespective of the artist and their intentions. This seems to have led to the effort to withdraw the artist and their intentions from art *altogether*, a point later to be made even more explicitly in the examples discussed above, and in conceptual art.¹¹ I am pointing to a regular enmity toward the human origins of art: *Away with the artist’s divine self-conception, away with their intentions – they never absolutely determined a work’s meaning in full. It is we, the audience, who make the art mean whatever we want.*

THEORY V. ART

What is going on here? I think it is *theory* having trouble understanding the nature of art. This is Roland Barthes:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. (146)

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a *final signified*, to *close* the writing. (147, my italics).¹²

Barthes’ view involves a straw man reconstruction of artist’s intentions, which is why I prefer to talk about understanding a work in terms of the way in which its nature realises the artist’s intentions, refraining from making any over-confident claims about the ontology of these intentions outside of the work.

Conceptual art is great fun, especially to an art-loving philosopher like myself, but I am starting to believe that that is all there is to it. The examples I discussed above – which may be biased – seem to have no interest for people other than die-hard art lovers. Maybe its most significant impact is on art practice. In this, it reminds me of its roots, Dada, which arose in response to what was felt like the powerlessness of art in the face of the brutality of World War I.¹³ Maybe aesthetics has failed to sort out art’s societal impact, ever since. Perhaps, therefore, the contemporary rise of artistic activism and its often literal messages – though in conflict with art’s rhetoric – *is* a response of some sort to how conceptual art undermines art practice. Another cry for artistic relevance, and again the nature of art is at stake. This time it is its openness to appreciation. Barthes views the death of the author as the birth of the reader, overstating the audience’s role and understating the artist’s.

editor.aesthinv@gmail.com

NOTES

¹It is also a moral practice, but this column is not about that. See Van Gerwen 2004 for the moral aspect of art.

²Walton 2008.

³Knowing Picasso made the painting is a necessary condition for suitable spectatorship, not a sufficient one.

⁴See Wollheim 1980a and 1993.

⁵It seems that this piece cannot be recorded on a CD. An item on a CD would either have us listen to a recording of absent people’s everyday sounds; or it would consist of 4’33” nothing, not a recording. This is telling too, I think, of a problem with this work.

⁶The reproduction did not even give me that real chair – but that is a different issue (about photography).

⁷Dickie 1984. The ‘institutional’ conception begs the question, as Wollheim argued. In Wollheim 1980b.

⁸Berys Gaut 2000, 25 discusses the appeal to masterworks as if spectators are meant to see a work’s resemblance with some particular masterwork to find out whether they can count as a work of art. Of course he resists such a narrow use of the notion of resemblance.

⁹Van Gerwen 2014.

¹⁰This is why reading a text that one knows is ‘written’ by an ‘artificial intelligence’ (or by two authors) should be hard psychologically.

¹¹They say that art reflects developments in society at large, and perhaps the removal of the artist’s intentional activity reflects what we are seeing happen elsewhere? This would fit my argument in Van Gerwen 2018.

¹²Quoted from Barthes 1977.

¹³Conceptual art similarly is a reaction to the unjust atrocities of the Vietnam War (1955-1975). Thanks to Sue Spaid for this reminder.

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