

Aesthetic Investigations

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Reversed essentialism

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Abstract: Treating exceptional cases as marks of an essence is as bad as essentialism. I suggest we understand art as a practice, not as something we could, or should find the eternally necessary and sufficient conditions of.

With an acceptance rate of 0.0, I guess we ought to say that the anonymous peer review system works, though it would be cynicism to say that it pays off. It also severely delayed publication of this issue. Tough luck. Especially for the excellent contributions we received for our other sections, *Fresh* and *Arts & Artists*. So no more dawdling.

One small other thing: What is art? It seems clear to many that art cannot be defined. But what kind of definition are we looking for – one that settles the identity of all, and only works of art for eternity? Surely there must be some way to say something about how artists make works of different kinds, in distinct art forms; and about how we viewers, listeners, and so on, treat such works as being made by artists who aim their works to be treated in that particular manner? And to say something about how works thus act as some sort of go-between between artists and members of the audience in ways that are peculiar to art; and about how the experiences of beholders reward them for showing them how they relate to the world – how the affordances of art are atypical and intended to be atypical; how artistic normativity is something other than aesthetic normativity.

And something may be said about how people, let us call them philosophers, can come up with all sorts of exceptions that seem to fit what we say about art, but only barely if at all. Of course, we now think of Duchamp's

Fountain, and a host of contemporary artistic experiments. But it is not clear how such exceptions tell us how to conceive of art. Probably they are just that, exceptions – not things and events that we can make clear sense of within the confines just sketched.

We often include these exceptions as providing aspects of art that our definition should accommodate, I think too leniently and too charitably. We witness a similar response to the logic of the internet – where any small bit of what seems to be smoke is taken to be proof of the fire – treating the exception as the new rule. Distinction-bashing seems baked in in contemporary cultural systems – the media, the internet, social media. But the debate on art’s definition shows that these responses have a long history. They are rooted in a certain brand of doing philosophy.

Plato’s search for indubitable forms or ideas involves a search for necessary and sufficient conditions, and each exception seems to dismiss a definitive element, even if there are good reasons for upholding it. We currently more and more reverse that philosophical exercise – which is only a small step – committing many a consequent fallacy. For instance, we put works of art in museums, and therefore works of art are often found in museums. The consequent, now, says that because *Fountain* is in a museum, or in art history catalogues, therefore it is art. Or this: if Walker Evans’ photos are art, how then can Sherrie Levine’s *After Walker Evans*-photos not be art? Reversed essentialism is as bad as essentialism is.

Art is a practice and its – art-internal – norms of correctness are available, in how we treat works, to those present to such treatment. Philosophers only need the patience and attention required to sort things out and be prepared to think of the decisive considerations as being instant-and-context-bound. Benjamin Tilghman says it beautifully:

The word ‘art’ and all its relatives are learned in connection with learning to look, read, and listen – in a word, along with the development of aesthetic sensitivity and appreciation – and it is the many facets of these activities that give the word its many uses. (Tilghman, *But is it Art?*, 1984, p. 67.)

So the question, rather, is: What do we mean when we say of something that it is art? I am sure the texts in this issue of *Aesthetic Investigations* help us deal with this question. They help a lot. Thank you, to the authors, and to Edward Winters for inviting and managing, as our guest editor, most of the contributions to our *Arts & Artists*-section.

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