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How Should Contextual Matters Figure into Art Evaluations?

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Abstract: Suppose that the case has been made that evaluations of the artistic merit of an object or an event should include matters that are outside the scope of the purely formal. Accounts of why contextual matters should be relevant to art evaluation have been offered, and I would like to explore what comes next, that is, how contextual matters should be considered when it comes to the evaluation of art objects and events.

I.

Suppose that the case has been made that evaluations of the artistic merit of an object or an event should include matters that are outside the scope of the purely formal. ‘Outside the scope of the purely formal’ I would call ‘contextual’. Accounts of why contextual matters should be relevant to art evaluation have been offered, and I would like to explore what comes next, that is, how contextual matters should be considered when it comes to the evaluation of art objects and events.¹

First, what is a purely formal approach to evaluating works of art? Such an approach is to limit consideration of relevant matters exclusively to properties that exist as or through the object’s properties alone, without (straightforward) reference or relation to anything outside the object. In other words, to the object’s aesthetic properties. (Such approaches regularly incorporate consideration of representative features of works and the literary features of

literary works.) An object's formal aesthetic properties have been described widely as arising from or through that object's properties that are, without mediation, accessible to an observer's senses. An object may possess the aesthetic properties of elegance, balance, harmony, grace, and so forth, and it possesses such properties because of the presence and configuration of line, texture, color, tone, symmetry, and other such 'basic' properties that are, through human senses, known to be present in the object. This is to say that formal aesthetic properties do not admit of any subjective matters – any matters that have their being in the subject, the audience member – except in the most rudimentary sense that metaphysically it likely requires a subject for the existence of aesthetic properties as they are seen, through the exercise of the human faculty of taste, to actually exist.² And it is also to say that an object's formal aesthetic properties do not include any matters that have their being beyond the object (as the object is known immediately through human senses).³

Second, what does it mean to evaluate an art object, taking into account relevant contextual matters? It is first to recognise that works of art bear many relations to other works of art and they bear many relations to the subjects – the audience members, the 'attenders' – who view, hear, or otherwise experience them. These relationships point to facts either about the object itself or the experience of it that at many times when an evaluation is being performed seem relevant to that evaluation. That is, a contextual matter may raise or lower the value of the object or the experience of the object. If the case is made that such matters should be included in an overall assessment of the work of the object, then the question is: how should this be done? And this is precisely what this paper is about.

II. WHAT IS BEING EVALUATED?

Is the evaluation being done of the work of art itself or of a subject's experience of the work? The answer to this question depends largely on the theory of artistic value, or perhaps aesthetic value (as would more likely be the case in formalist approaches), that is being employed. Different value theories will focus in different ways in terms of identifying the locus of the value. Let's briefly consider the two obvious alternatives.

Is the value in question located in the object itself? The formalist is more likely to prefer this approach, given that she means to focus for evaluative purposes on those properties that are possessed by the object in a straightforward way. And others may prefer this approach as well, given that it would seem the greatest evaluative stability is found by focusing on the most stable part of the equation, the object itself. Works of art, for the most part, do not change a great deal. Some may change a bit as time wears them down or the original mechanisms for producing allographic works are worn down. Some may change because their means of reproduction are inherently vul-

nerable to change. This is certainly the case with dance. Two dances that bear the same name may be different from one another, even when they have choreographers who were taught by the same teacher, because their memories of what they were taught differ slightly, because they are working with different companies of dancers with different styles of training, because the stages for the two dance performances are different sizes and accommodation must be made, and so forth. Some works of art, particularly modern ones, may change as their components naturally decay. Chris Ofili's famous (or infamous) *Madonna* with a breast fashioned from elephant dung is a case in point. Or Damien Hirst's bifurcated animals. But these cases are largely either outliers or we are comfortable that their particular forms unavoidably admit of change. In the main, works of art are static, and so it may be assumed that if we focus on the object itself, evaluations of that object will enjoy the same stability. And of course the gold standard (brass ring?) for evaluation is stability and universality across all particular evaluations.

In art evaluation where the focus is exclusively on the object's formal properties, relations that the object may bear to other objects or to subjects are not relevant. Again, we must be careful to say that the very existence of aesthetic properties, as we described above, may of necessity involve reference to subjects, but the relationship in question here is not one that impacts the value of the object. One may claim that what aesthetic properties arise through the attendance of the subject to the object is certainly a matter of value: the subject chooses which 'basic' properties on which to focus, and the resulting value of the object can be radically different, one subjective focus to another. But those who make such an objection, however correct it is possible they may be, seem to be cheating the formalist of her prize. Oscar Wilde wished to escape the intrusion of the subject imposing anything about her own perspective on the value of the object. To then say that all acts of bringing into existence aesthetic properties are necessarily value-laden is to rob Wilde of his goal: the potential of a pure art evaluation of an object. We can perhaps protect a Wildean approach by eliminating the vagaries of particular subjective assessments of the set of aesthetic properties possessed by an object by invoking a Humean conception of an ideal attender, one who possesses the appropriate virtues such that any two of these ideal attenders would render very similar if not identical sets of an object's aesthetic properties. Whether such an approach would ultimately pan out in practice – or even hold up to theoretical scrutiny – is a matter of debate, but if we are willing to grant Wilde the possibility of his prize, then an approach sufficiently like this one must be on offer.

The challenge to objectivist approaches comes when, in seeking for what accounts for this evaluative stability, we construct nomological devices or formulas, ones that hold that if properties x, y, or z are present in a particular work, that work possess the appropriate features to be rightly judged to be artistically or aesthetically meritorious. This approach, and the seeds of its

apparent failure, are evident right through from ancient Greek to medieval Europe, and it had its heyday in the 17th and 18th centuries.⁴ Objective formulas were attempted time and again – and for good reason: they should have been implied by the original commitment to understanding the locus of value to be the object and its properties.

By the advent of Hume and Kant, the focus on the objective was giving way to a focus on the subjective, and it is here where the theories of artistic/aesthetic value of the 20th and 21st centuries have their roots. Once that focus changes, it changes for good. While there may still be theories that hold that the value of works of art are intrinsic or even inherent in the object itself, these are not commonplace. The switch to the subject and the subject's experience are the norm today.

Today there are aesthetic evaluation theories that focus on the subject's experience, and these theories cash out value in terms that focus on one sort or another of movement occasioned in the subject – movement in cognition, in emotion, in psychology, in a feeling of escape of some sort, or simply a movement toward felt pleasure (though perhaps that is captured under 'emotion').⁵ These are worthy theories since objects whose aesthetic characters are unactualised by human attention are comparable to trees falling in empty forests.

It is possible one might argue in a way very different from the objectivist approach sketched above that when it comes to a thoroughly contextualist approach to art evaluation, still there is no need to bother with exploring a relationship between the object and the subject since our focus may be thought to be exclusively on the experience of the audience member, and, as such, be exclusively about the subject herself. The object, in this scenario, would occupy a position similar to that of the subject in the sketch from above: it may be necessary to a thorough description of the situation, but it plays no role that impacts the value of the experience. Surely there are those who believe that every experience is so deeply embedded in a subjective situatedness that no two may ever be claimed to be similar enough to constitute comparability. There is, in this case, no object that is relevant, as each focus of an experience is practically radically different from every other focus. To attach it to something external to the subject's perception is a conceit. And while we may be tempted by such a conceit, because we as audience members love to be able to compare our experiences with those of others and with our own experiences over time, we should avoid falling prey to such a temptation because it crowds the playing field with more items than are metaphysically necessary. The felt experience is enough, and so no matters of relation need to be addressed. So such a claim might say.

Contextual matters, broadly conceived, certainly include elements that index very narrowly to a particular subject at a particular place and time. These sorts of contextual elements must be considered legitimate as pieces of the evaluative puzzle when the value we are focused on is located in the

subject's experience. My experience of an aesthetic object as a matter of straightforward fact will include a very wide range of elements that are not available to anyone but me, are integral to my experience, and, vis a vis their being part of my individual experience, are incorrigible as I cite them as evidence in my case for the worth of that experience. If we have as our evaluative focus a particular experience, not only will the list of items that rightly may be included in an evaluation be potentially enormous, it may not be transferrable from one subject to another in any satisfying way – that is, in any way that involves substantive enough comparison. And if it is not transferrable, one subject to another, it is likely not going to perform any real work when it comes to building an interesting evaluative case. Without meaningful comparison, without meaningful applications over a set with a membership greater than one, what is the point?

To argue either the merits of the Wildean approach or this hyper-phenomenalised approach is beyond this paper. To argue for one theory of artistic or aesthetic value over another is beyond this paper. What we can, nevertheless, take away from this brief overview is the following. First, if we have conceded that contextual matters may be relevant to the evaluation of a work of art, and we acknowledge that contextual matters almost certainly refer to relationships between the object under evaluation and facts external to that object, we are likely going to find ourselves rejecting purely objectivist accounts of the location of artistic value. Second, if we have then conceded that artistic value necessarily has to do with subjective appreciation of the object, and so to some important degree the value lies in the subject's experience of the object, then we have to do the work of figuring out just exactly which experiential matters are relevant and which ones are not.

III. TO WHOM ARE THE RELEVANT CONTEXTUAL PROPERTIES RELEVANT?

We might hope that the answer to this question is 'everyone'. But that gets very tricky. Let us begin by sketching out a continuum going from those properties that are relevant to everyone and those that are relevant only to the single particular subject. At one end of the spectrum are matters that are available to any subject who has but a little knowledge about the object; in the case of art, we could include genetic matters about the origin of the work, its provenance, the history of its exhibition, and perhaps how it has been regarded during its time (for instance, the *Mona Lisa* may be special in part simply because of how it has been regarded over its lifespan). At the far other end of the spectrum are matters that are indexed to a particular subject at a particular time and place; these matters could include how much time the subject has for attending to the object, whether the subject is distracted, and whether the subject is in a good mood.⁶

It is too easy to say that what may be relevant to everyone are ‘facts’, because while ‘facts’ will include items that are widely publicly accessible like genetic and provenancial information, it is a matter of ‘fact’ that while, at a given place and at a given time, I watch *Casablanca*, I may work out how I think and feel about identifying with Rick; I may consider the irony that while the film is abundantly anti-fascist there are in the world today elements of fascism rising again; I may wrestle with how moving the scenes are that focus on the singing of the *Marseillaise* while at the same time realising that some of the words of the song are nationalist, even nativist, in at least an uncomfortable way; I may enjoy the nostalgia of remembering when I first saw the film and under what conditions; I might even think about whether I want to use the film as my example of ‘Classic Hollywood’ the next time I teach a course in the aesthetics of film. These are all factual matters; they are facts about my particular experience. But of course they are largely if not exclusively only available to me as an individual.

On the other end of the spectrum, if we say that to be considered relevant a fact must be accessible to everyone, we run a different risk. Not every attender to a particular work of art will be as educated about that work as every other. This is almost sure to be the case. We may privilege the educated viewer and hold the position that when it comes to seeking the most stable approach to evaluating a work of art we will appeal to an idealised version of the educated viewer, one who, perhaps following Hume here, knows as much about the object and its relations as the most informed critic might be expected to.

This strikes me as impractical if not elitist. Not only may we have moral qualms about privileging such a perspective, not only may we have epistemic or otherwise theoretic hesitations about relegating true evaluations to ideals and not to actual folks having actual experiences, we may have lost sight of our original golden goal of capturing the universality we might wish in artistic evaluation. This last criticism is one that may be levelled at Kant and likely Hume as well. ‘Universal’ becomes something available, at best, only to a small set of properly situated and properly mindful attenders, and perhaps – in the worst case of where the evaluative mechanisms are too idealised – to none at all.

Granted this is a worst case scenario. Our goal may be more modest in terms of the breadth of commonality about such judgements, and we may believe that if everyone literally means ‘everyone’, practicality, and so usefulness, goes out the window. But it should be clear that the two ends of the continuum are likely not going to provide us with what we seek: a circumscription of exactly which contextual matters should be relevant when making art evaluations.

If either end of the continuum is not looking promising – the one end far too liberal in terms of accepting every feature of every attender’s experience, the other being far too conservative in limiting what is relevant only to what is

accessible to, at best, the very few – we need to look at the middle. If we take ‘the middle’ too literally, though, we have another problem, the problem of populism. Taking a survey of the majority of attenders to a particular work, asking each if they found their experience valuable and then amalgamating the results, is not the right path. This path is simply an aggregation of the ‘too liberal’ approach, and it has all those same pitfalls. Perhaps then we need to think about ‘the middle’ a bit more theoretically. If we removed the stylised idealisation from our construction of the ‘well educated’ viewer, retaining ‘well educated’ but cashing that in practical terms, terms that cash out the access to this education as being widely available to attenders with access to museum guides or playbills or performance notes, to the small (or sometimes large) plaques that are in proximity to works hanging in museums or galleries, to popular venues of criticism from respectable YouTube-style videos to quality blogs to the *New Yorker* – nothing in this list can be taken as either necessary or sufficient, of course – we might end up with a ‘middle’ that is recognisable, practical, and, more importantly, satisfying to our intuitions (‘our’ being those of the full range of members of the Artworld, however central or distant from Arthur Danto’s core that membership may be).

IV. WHEN IS THE EVALUATION MADE?

If contextual matters are relevant to the evaluation of a work of art, then given that contextual matters can and do change over time, the question of ‘when’ the evaluation is made seems an important one.

Many have had the experience of waiting to purchase a new piece of technology until we believe the advance of the technology has stabilised and will not be replaced by something entirely new in short order. We wait until it looks as though Blu-ray will not be replaced before buying films; we wait until CDs look permanent before replacing our vinyl collection; we wait until the safety features available on our new cars have reached an apparent plateau before purchase. And most have had the experience where at some point one just makes the purchase, not knowing whether stability has been achieved; we launch out in faith that our purchases will not meet regret. But we really do not know. The same is the case with art evaluations. If we follow some version of the Test of Time as a sign of the value of a work of art, it is near impossible to know exactly that the appropriate point in time is reached so that the evaluation we make has some chance of stability. Inflated valuations happen early, as does the situation where great works go unnoticed; fads tend to be identifiable as do financial art market fluctuations. But, barring these, to know precisely when a stable judgement should be made is not easy.

Works of art change in value.⁷ Once one leaves a strictly formalist or objectivist take on evaluation, this seems a brute fact. And many of these changes are occasioned by contextual matters. When a work is ‘discovered’, this changes its value. When an artist dies, this sometimes changes the value

of works by that artist. When the political context in which the work was created changes, a work's value may change. Given that these changes are not (normally) under the control of the evaluator, it would seem the best rule to follow is simply this: once one takes account of common and recognisable vagaries connected to the value of work of art, the evaluator is free to make an evaluation. This evaluation is not a once-and-for-all judgement; it is instead indexed to a particular time, and as time passes, evaluations should be made again and again.

There is nothing lost in such an approach except for those who believe that the value of objects is a permanent and immutable condition. If one believes, instead, that changes in value are natural and expected, then when an evaluation is made should not cause us worry.

V. WHICH PROPERTIES?

Despite the adoption of an evaluative approach that significantly incorporates the subject and her experience, and despite the (apparent) fact that the value of art objects are not entirely stable over the span of their existences, still we should seek as much stability in our judgements as we can achieve. This is for the reason that comparisons – comparisons among viewers, comparisons over successive encounters with the object, comparisons among art objects themselves – are only interesting if there is something worthy about the judgement.

We might therefore begin a list of those contextual properties that are relevant to an evaluation with those items that are connected to the object itself. The object was created at a certain time and place, and by a certain person or set of persons. In the case of autographic works, the object was possessed by certain persons or institutions. The object was exhibited, performed or otherwise made available to certain audiences in certain venues. These factual matters adhere to the object itself, and so to the degree to which the object is stable – and again, that may be a sliding scale – these matters will be stable.

Certainly we would include in the list of relevant contextual matters the representative features of works that are representative (or widely taken to be). We would include the relationships the object bears to others created by the same artist, by the same school of art, in the same style, at the same time, in the same location, and so forth. For literature, we would of course include the semantic content of the object; for architecture, furniture, and so forth, the function or functionality of the object; for works that are purported by their creators as being didactic or message driven, the ideas meant to be conveyed.

Should the list stop there? Likely not. The educated viewer described above tends to know more than these object-focused facts. Our educated viewer likely knows the sort of facts that populate art critical reviews, facts

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about how the work generally has been received by audiences, how audiences have found meaning in the work or how the work has been commonly interpreted, and matters concerning how the artist regarded the work, if the artist chose to make those matters public.

In addition, we might add one more category. If there are contextual matters about the work that are grounded in the formal features of the object, then they too should be counted as relevant to evaluations given that they may be the most accessible to audiences of all properties. For instance, if a painting employs a pointillist style, we may wish to compare it to other pointillist works. If a musical composition includes discordant elements or counterpoint elements, we may wish to compare those works with works that include similar elements.

And so, on what types of matters might we wish to focus? A non-exhaustive list might include the following when it comes to works of art:

- Matters pertaining to the artist
- Matters pertaining to the conditions of the origin of the work
- Matters pertaining to the existence of the work through time
- Matters pertaining to provenance of the work
- Matters pertaining to the exhibition (performance, etc.) of the work
- Matters pertaining to the representative features of the work
- Matters pertaining to the style of the work
- Matters pertaining to the ‘fame’ of the work; how the work has been, in the main, received by audiences and the scale of those audiences and those receptions
- Matters pertaining to artist intentions
- Matters pertaining to the history of the critical review of the work
- Matters pertaining to large-scale trends of audience identification with aspects of the work: does the work, according to those who talk about it, teach audience members a lesson; does it have a pronounced didactic impact? Does it speak to the ethical, religious or political climate surrounding it? Does it speak to the experience of those who are from a particular race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identification? Does it speak to the experience of those from a particular geographical area or a particular socio-economic status? Does it speak to those in particular relationships with other humans, with other animals, with other material objects, with particular bounded lifespans?
- Matters pertaining to the large-scale trends of audience cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, psychological engagement with the work; does the work speak to particular abstractions that typically engage audience consideration?

VI. HOW SHOULD THEY BE INCORPORATED?

We come full circle to the question on which this paper is based: how should contextual matters figure into art evaluations?

The premises with which we are working are the following:

- We take it as a premise that the case for inclusion of relevant contextual matters in the evaluation of work of art is made (although not here).
- To the extent possible the focus is on the object itself, but no exclusively objective approach will be satisfying today; evaluations must include reference to the audience member and her experience of the work.
- In complement, no approach that focuses exclusively on a particular subject's particular experience will be satisfying; neither will be an approach that simply aggregates such things.
- The object's relationships to other objects and to subjects are evaluatively important.
- The value of works of art change over time, but despite this enough stability is achievable in evaluations to make them interesting for the purposes of comparison.
- And, finally, although no mention of this has been made so far, the inclusion of contextual matters in art evaluations should fit most, perhaps the vast majority, of theories that explain artistic (and/or aesthetic) value – that is, apart from the purely objectivist sort. The one view mentioned in this paper is a 'soft' version of the Humean Test of Time, something along the lines that works of art that sustain repeated attention by a wide variety of audiences, that continue to reward this attention over repeated encounters, and that do so over time, are works that bear the symptom of possessing artistic value (and/or aesthetic value, the two being fairly similar before the 20th century, somewhat distinct after).⁸

Given this, I would propose that the way that relevant contextual matters should be included in evaluations of works of art is that each matter should weigh in the evaluation to the degree of its experiential impact across a large range of appropriately suited real-life attenders. If a relevant contextual matter makes a noteworthy impact on the experiences of educated viewers, across the spectrum discussed in this paper, those matters should be included in the evaluation. The degree to which a particular matter should influence the evaluation should be in direct proportion of the experiential impact across the spectrum of educated viewers. If a relevant contextual matter makes no broad experiential difference, it should be ignored in the evaluation. If it makes some small difference, it should be included but only to that same small degree. If it makes a major difference, then it should be included in a significantly focal way.

Educated viewers know something about the importance to the American art scene of Jackson Pollock and his drip paintings. In the early twentieth century, critics like Clement Greenberg focused on the formalist aspects of works of art – in this case painting – recommending painterly approaches that incorporated greater focus on the medium itself. Abstract expressionism –

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particularly American but perhaps more widely – gave up representational features for ones that focused more obviously and directly on the paint (and color, line, texture, etc.) itself. Pollock was working in exactly this vein, with his drip paintings becoming less and less representational and more and more ‘flat’ in terms of the spatial depth suggested by the paint on the canvas. My respect for Pollock is borne almost entirely on this sort of story; I have very little appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of his work, but I still am keen to visit *Number 1*, aka *Lavender Mist*, and spend some time with it each time I am in Washington D.C. My time spent with it is not in appreciation of its aesthetic qualities but rather out of respect for its importance as a step along the way in the evolution of American art. The context of this work accounts for its artistic value to a large degree; this is the case for me – I count myself an educated viewer – but also for many. Not, I am quick to add, for all. *Lavender Mist* is one of the more aesthetically attractive of the drip paintings, I believe, and I am certain there are many who would judge the value of the work to lie in its formal beauty. The extent to which the art-historical situated-ness of *Lavender Mist* accounts for its value is a matter of assessing whether, through time and over a range of similarly prepared viewers, the consensus is more toward my view or more toward a traditional aesthetic view. This is not a matter of taking a poll; it is rather a matter of watching the trends in critical discussions of the work, in how the work is described in art history and philosophical aesthetics courses, in what curators choose to say about it in guides and on plaques, and perhaps even how folks at cocktail parties talk about it. To know the impact of the contextual story, we need to identify the trajectory of the conversation with a hope of finding a general consensus about the core of the narrative today.

In this same arena, I imagine the story is a bit different with the work of Mark Rothko and his large colour-field paintings. There are similar formal elements in both the work of Pollock and of Rothko, and this is so to a high degree. And the educated viewer may know something about Rothko’s work – that he did not want it overlit, that he wanted viewers to come upon it and appreciate a work’s typically large size somewhat abruptly, that he believed the works were expressions of abstract emotional states, things like this. But my guess is that the bulk of viewers of many of Rothko’s works appreciate those works aesthetically – by which I mean here formally – rather than in light of their contexts. The Seagram Collection at the Tate Modern is displayed as Rothko might have liked, but what is noteworthy for my purposes is that at the center of the somewhat enclosed and compact room in which the large primarily black and maroon canvases are hung are benches. My recollection is that there are several. This suggests to me that Tate Modern patrons are spending time looking at the canvases, perhaps significant time. Works of art whose highest value is found in appreciating them cognitively do not need benches. Which is to say, the benches are there to facilitate time spent by the viewer in appreciation of the perceptual qualities of the

work; cognitive appreciation does not necessarily require an investment of time spent looking but rather thinking, and thinking is not something that must be done in the presence of the work. J.M.W. Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire*, voted in 2005 as Britain's favourite painting and hanging for a great number of years in London's National Gallery across town from the Tate Modern, has before it large red leather sofas, ones I know from experience are comfortable enough to spend a great deal of time in contemplation of – for me – the traditional aesthetic features of the painting. My guess is that the same is the case for the Rothko Seagram Collection. If I am right that this is the general trajectory of how paintings in this collection are appreciated, then the contextual matters I mentioned directly above should not feature strongly in accounts of the value of these works.

I focus on these two painters because their work is generally well known, relatively recent, easily accessible, the focus of a lot of conversation, and have fairly well known contextual aspects among those who consider themselves followers of art, particularly modern art. We have a good chance of getting right, for now, an evaluation of the value of *Lavender Mist* and one of the Black-and-Maroon Rothko canvases in light of the degree to which contextual aspects of these works play a role in the experiences of those who spent time with them.

'A relevant contextual matter should be included in an evaluation of a work of art to the degree of its experiential impact across a large range of educated viewers' should be the case regardless of whether the inclusion of the matter in the evaluation enhances or diminishes the value of the work. As some formal features of works increase the value of those works, and as some decrease the value, so it should be the same with contextual matters. Evaluations are only proper when they are made on a level playing field, when they are not prejudiced in any way, when they incorporate the full range of available data. In this they are like explanations, theories, or other epistemic justificatory cases. And actually they are not 'like' epistemic justificatory cases, they are such cases. Crafting a case for the value of a work of art is an exercise in critical thinking as much as crafting a case for any belief or claim is. So long as the crafting is principled, then the claim will enjoy the degree of support the case offers. What this paper purports to do is offer a principled means of crafting cases for artistic judgements concerning the inclusion of contextual matters.

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NOTES

¹See David Fenner 2008. Whether cases made for the inclusion of contextual

matters in either understanding art experience or in evaluating art are ultimately successful, the 'how' question may still be of interest. Occasionally answers to 'how'

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questions cast interesting light back on the ‘what’ questions by revealing practical implications of adopting the view or claim on offer.

²Following, of course, Sibley 1959.

³This account is meant to follow the work of Nick Zangwill: 1999, 2000a, and 2000b. Formalism has a strong intuitive appeal; it seeks to set aside the irrelevant and distracting in its (experiential or evaluative) focus on the aesthetic qualities of the object or event under review, with ‘aesthetic’ qualities understood as those that connect, in etymological fashion, with the concept of ‘aesthetics’, traditionally understood to be one’s un-mediated sensory uptake of an experience. Prior to Picasso and Duchamp, there was little reason to question this approach; unfortunately now such an approach has largely been abandoned – except of course for the exceptions like Nick Zangwill.

⁴Aristotle, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas all offered such formulas, but perhaps some of the strongest approaches were offered by Joseph Addison 1957, Archibald Alison 1968, Lord Shaftesbury 1964, and Francis Hutcheson 1971. The creation of objective formulas are the natural result of adopting the approach that there are properties or configurations of properties that give rise in lawlike ways to the presence of such evaluatively summative properties as beauty and aesthetic merit. Once one adopts such an objective approach to evaluation, the implication is that some formula can be discovered. As counterexamples to formulas are discovered or invented anew by artists, the promise of such an objectivist approach fades.

⁵See Alan Goldman 1995. On pages 150 and 151, Goldman writes: ‘The value of such works lies first in the challenge and richness of the perceptual, affective, and cognitive experience they afford. Symbolic and expressive density combines here with sensuous feel. From the subjective side, all one’s perceptual, cognitive, and affective capacities can be engaged in apprehending these relations, even if one’s grasp of them is imperfect or only implicit. These different facets of appreciation are not only engaged simultaneously but are also often indissolubly united, as when formal relations among musical tones or painted shapes are experienced as felt tensions and resolutions and perhaps as higher-order or more ordinary emotions as well. . . . When we are so fully and satisfyingly involved in appreciating an artwork, we can be said to lose our ordinary, practically oriented selves in a world of the work. . . . [It] can engage us so fully as to constitute another world for us, at least temporarily.’

⁶See David Fenner 2003

⁷See Anita Silvers 1991.

⁸See Peter Kivy 1986, for an examination of the relationship between the ‘test of time’ and the ideal critic/educated viewer. Kivy suggests that the test of time implies an appeal to authority and that authority need not be drawn out over time but rather captured in a subject who possesses the appropriate abilities to judge well. In other words, there’s no reason to wait for the test of time to do the work it holds promise to if we can appeal to an ideally situated and skilled critic now. The practicalities of such an approach are what motivates me to construct the particulars of my view of the ‘educated viewer’.

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