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THE AESTHETIC RELEVANCE OF ARTISTIC ACTS: AN EXAMINATION OF
RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE THEORY AND METATHEORY OF ART

by

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principles constitutive of that framework are construed in the manner of traditional philosophy of art. I argue, however, that the problem resides in the construal rather than in the principles themselves, and the arguments offered against these principles are at best conclusive only against these principles under their traditional interpretations. Weitz's arguments against the 'Essentialist Principle' only tell against definitions of art which refer to 'directly exhibited' properties of objects relevant to their being appreciated as artworks, and are thus ineffective against definitions in terms of 'non-exhibited' properties such as those contained in the 'institutional' accounts of art proposed by Dickie and Binkley; such accounts explicate 'arthood' in terms of the acquisition of a particular place in the 'artworld' through the performance of an 'artistic act' by the artist. Dickie and Binkley are wrong, however, in thinking that the 'artistic act' theory of art demonstrates the falsity, or dispensability, of the 'Principle of Aesthetic Relevance', save under its traditional interpretation. Indeed, so I argue, it is only if 'artistic acts' are related to certain concepts of the 'aesthetic' that the 'artistic act' theory of art can avoid a form of vicious circularity which vitiates the accounts offered by Dickie and Binkley.

In the light of this analysis, I attempt to develop an alternative version of the 'artistic act' theory on the basis of Binkley's notion of 'piece-specification' and the 'semiotic' theory of the 'aesthetic' expounded by Nelson Goodman. The 'artistic act' theory is rendered tenable through supplementation by Goodman's thesis that artworks are 'aesthetic symbols'; conversely, so I argue, Goodman's

thesis must itself be supplemented by an 'artistic act' theory if it is to adequately explicate the arthood of objects and the nature of artistic appreciation. Once this mutual supplementation is effected, it becomes possible to resolve artistic puzzlement without necessitating the rejection of either of the traditional methodological principles of the philosophy of art.

The formulation of philosophical theories, no less than that of scientific theories, is an activity that occurs within the context of an explicitly or implicitly espoused metatheory. Such a metatheory not only prescribes and attempts to validate the theoretician's adoption of a particular methodology, but also establishes the criteria by reference to which theories are to be assessed. When metatheoretical concerns proliferate in the literature of a given area of study, therefore, it may reasonably be assumed that at least some of the practitioners of that discipline are skeptical as to the acceptability of the established methods of formulating and evaluating theories within their field. An examination of recent literature in the philosophy of art reveals a growing concern with questions of a metatheoretical nature. Several writers have argued for the rejection of certain established methodological principles in the field, while others have even expressed doubts about the future viability of the field itself. In the following pages I shall attempt to evaluate the arguments of the former, as a means to possibly assuaging the doubts of the latter.

A necessary preliminary to such an endeavour will be an elucidation of the methodological principles whose tenability is in question. We might enquire as to what these principles are, and what considerations might establish their prima facie credibility as principles that should govern theoretical reflection about art. I shall try to answer these questions by looking, firstly, at the phenomena which the theories are attempting to explain, and, secondly, at

some of the theories which attempt to explain these phenomena. It will be argued, on such grounds, that the philosophical treatment of art has, until quite recently, occurred within a methodological framework the constitutive principles of which reflect salient features of artistic and critical practice. These principles I shall term the 'Essentialist Principle' and the 'Principle of Aesthetic Relevance'. The 'Essentialist Principle' asserts that the primary goal of a philosophical theory of art is the formulation of a definition of 'art', or of 'work of art', which captures the 'essence' of arthood through the specification of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for a thing's being art, or a work of art. The 'Principle of Aesthetic Relevance' asserts that the philosophical treatment of art falls within the purview of philosophical aesthetics, and that the properties of objects relevant to an understanding of what it is to be, or function as, a work of art are 'aesthetic properties', properties having the capacity to elicit 'aesthetic experience' in those who engage in an experiential encounter with objects possessing them.

It is these principles that have come under fire in the proliferation of metatheoretical activity that has characterised philosophical reflection on art over the past quarter of a century. Morris Weitz and a number of other writers influenced by the later Wittgenstein⁽¹⁾ have argued that traditional methodology in the philosophy of art is misconceived in that it presupposes the acceptability of the 'Essentialist Principle'. The latter, so it is claimed, is untenable, since it rests upon a mistaken conception of the 'logic' of the concept 'art'. 'Art', according to Weitz, is an 'open' concept, and this precludes the possibility of formulating a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for a thing's being a work of art. Weitz's claims have been disputed by George

Dickie, who has attempted to confer a new respectability on the 'Essentialist Principle' by offering a definition of the term 'work of art' that trades on Arthur Danto's notion of the 'Artworld'.⁽²⁾ The 'Artworld', according to Dickie, is the institutional setting in which certain artifacts acquire the status of 'work of art' by virtue of being treated in certain ways. In his endeavour to defend the 'Essentialist Principle', however, Dickie is led to reject the 'Principle of Aesthetic Relevance'; works of art are to be distinguished from non-works not in terms of their possession of 'aesthetic properties', but, rather, in terms of the 'non-exhibited' property of having received, by conferral, the status of 'work of art'.

While the metatheoretical proposals of Weitz and Dickie may seem radical when viewed in the context of traditional methodology in the philosophy of art, Timothy Binkley, in a recent paper⁽³⁾, takes both writers to task for their conservatism, and demonstrates his own philosophical radicalism by arguing for the rejection of both of the established methodological principles. While agreeing with Weitz that the concept 'art' is not susceptible to definition, Binkley claims that this is not, as Weitz believes, a consequence of the 'openness' which the concept shares with other empirical concepts, but, rather, a consequence of what Binkley terms its 'radical openness', a characteristic unique to the concept 'art'. Further, in arguing for his position, Binkley also rejects the 'Principle of Aesthetic Relevance', claiming that 'aesthetics is a study of aesthetic qualities, and aesthetic qualities are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of arthood'.⁽⁴⁾ Such heresies seem to call for an inquisition, or at least for more careful scrutiny. Such scrutiny I shall attempt to provide in the remainder of this paper.

As I noted above, however, there are certain preliminary questions requiring prior examination. I shall begin with a brief account of certain puzzles arising in the context of our practical commerce with works of art. Two of these puzzles - concerning the treatment of forgeries and the relevance of knowledge of the artist's intentions to the appreciation and understanding of works of art - are included in the traditional repertoire of problems on which philosophers of art have exercised their skill and ingenuity. The remaining puzzles, however, concerning the artistic status of non-artifacts and 'Readymades', originate in the creative ferment of modern art. Such puzzles, although they arise out of aspects of practice, are not 'practical' problems susceptible of practical solution. It is arguable that practice is never wholly uncompromised by theoretical liaisons. Whatever the more general case, however, our puzzlement over the problems cited above clearly depends, so I shall argue, upon an apparent conflict between the way in which we treat certain objects and a certain framework of beliefs, albeit somewhat unsystematised, concerning the nature of art, artistic appreciation, and artistic criticism. These beliefs, when made explicit, will be seen to involve a conception of the experience of works of art closely resembling that which is enshrined in the 'Principle of Aesthetic Relevance'. One's finding the puzzles puzzling, it will be argued, is at least partly a consequence of one's accepting this principle, and the 'Essentialist Principle', in a more or less sophisticated form.

The methodological principles of traditional philosophy of art are thus implicated in our 'common-sense', or pre-theoretical, understanding of art. That puzzlement over certain issues arises in the context of such an understanding does not imply, however, that no satisfactory resolution

of this puzzlement will be forthcoming within the methodological framework established by these principles. That one is puzzled reflects, perhaps, the unsystematic nature of one's understanding of art. A more fully and carefully developed theory of art might well perform a welcome act of demystification. With this possibility in mind, I shall briefly examine a representative sample of those theories of art developed prior to the advent of metatheoretical concern. In presenting these theories, I shall endeavour to show that they do, indeed, comply with the methodological principles of 'Essentialism' and 'Aesthetic Relevance'. As will be seen, such theories offer mutually incompatible 'solutions' to the artistic puzzles under consideration. If attention to traditional theories of art is to banish artistic puzzlement, therefore, some means of choosing between such theories will be required. After considering one possible method of making such a choice, I shall turn to an examination of the alternative possibility, argued for by the metatheoretical 'radicals' cited above, that no such choice is necessary, since all of the traditional theories of art are implicated in the 'guilt' of the methodological principles that they share.

The artistic puzzles that I shall discuss in the following chapter are significant, not only for the light which they throw on the practical implications of the methodological principles espoused by traditional philosophers of art, but also for other reasons germane to the spirit, and even the letter, of this paper. In the first place, a failure to achieve a satisfactory resolution to our puzzlement over such matters may adversely affect our ability to appreciate and understand certain works of art, and especially certain contemporary works. Secondly, it is puzzlement over such matters that generates much philosophical reflection

upon art, supplying the philosopher with both interest and impetus. Finally, and most significantly, if practical puzzles are often the progenitor of theory, they may also serve as its executioner. Nelson Goodman has written of such artistic puzzles, that '...answers to them do not amount to an aesthetic theory, or even the beginning of one, (but) failure to answer them can well be the end of one; and their exploration points the way to more basic problems and principles'.⁽⁵⁾

Part Two

Chapter Two The Structure of Artistic Puzzlement

Chapter Three Artistic Puzzlement and the 'Working Theory' of Art

Chapter Four Traditional Methodology in the Philosophy of Art

Chapter Five Traditional Theories of Art

Chapter Two The Structure of Artistic Puzzlement

The common man, that most ubiquitous of fictions, is commonly characterised as one relatively ignorant about art but omniscient concerning his own preferences. The little knowledge that 'not knowing much about art' permits would include, perhaps, the 'knowledge' that Leonardo's "Mona Lisa" is a work of art, whereas the latest model from the Ford assembly line, promotional literature notwithstanding, is not. The common man, if taxed upon the subject, might also admit to knowing that certain objects may be used in different ways, some of which uses might be termed 'artistic' and others 'non-artistic'. Consider, for example, a hard-back edition of James Joyce's novel Ulysses. If one opens the book and engages in the sequential reading of pages of the text, one is, in normal circumstances (but see below), putting the book to an 'artistic' use; the same book, if thrown at the cat in the interests of domestic tranquillity, is presumably being put to a 'non-artistic' use.

If the little knowledge possessed by the common man can carry him thus far without difficulty, its limitations begin to show when we consider cases that seem to call for more precise formulations of the intuitive distinctions between 'art' and 'non-art', and between 'artistic' and 'non-artistic' uses of objects. The following cases may serve to exemplify the sort of instances that might perplex our hypothetical common man:-

- 1.) The "Mona Lisa", let us agree, is a work of art. More specifically, it is a painting, and thus a work of visual art. The 'artistic' use of works of visual art would seem to involve attending to the perceptible properties of a painted canvas, a piece of marble, etc.

Consider the case of a copy of the "Mona Lisa" painted by a later artist. This copy, let us hypothesise, is perceptually indistinguishable from the original, save, perhaps, under 'abnormal' conditions of viewing (e.g., scrutiny of minute areas of the canvases under a powerful microscope). If the 'artistic use' of a painting involves attending to the painted surface of a canvas, and if the painted surfaces of the two canvases in question are, ex hypothesi, perceptually identical, then the original and the copy seem to admit of identical 'artistic uses'. And, if the original is valued for its 'artistic use', then the same value should presumably be accorded to the copy. Practice, however, rules otherwise; for while the original is recognised to be a valuable work of art and is exhibited in a gallery, the copy is denigrated as a forgery and is rarely, if ever, made available for public appreciation. It is worth noting, also, that this discrepancy in treatment is not necessarily rendered more intelligible if we modify our example so as to allow that the paintings are perceptually distinguishable to an expert, though not to the competent layman. For it seems highly implausible that so refined a perceptual difference could support so radical a difference in the values assigned and the treatments accorded to the paintings - the more so when we consider the number of paintings that are recognised to be artistically inferior to the "Mona Lisa" yet are nonetheless valued as works of art.

We are faced, then, with the following puzzle: if, as seems to be the case, we value works of art for the 'artistic uses' to which they can be put, why do we not recognise copies of paintings that are perceptually indistinguishable from the originals as being equally val-

uable? Wherein lies the relevant difference between the original, which is a work of art, and the copy, which is not?

2.) The "Mona Lisa", the common man's paradigm work of art, is an artifact, that is, a product of human workmanship. Since the latest model from the Ford production line is also an artifact and is not a work of art, artifactuality is clearly not a sufficient condition for something's being a work of art. It may be a necessary condition, however, in that the existence of a work of art seems to presuppose the productive activity of the artist of which the work is itself the product. Furthermore, 'natural' objects, such as mountains, lakes, trees, and animals, which are clearly non-artifacts, might be cited as paradigm cases of non-art. Again, however, practice, both artistic and linguistic, appears to confound our intuitions. Firstly, as Weitz has pointed out⁽¹⁾, we may describe a piece of driftwood as 'a lovely piece of sculpture', and hence, if pieces of sculpture are works of art, as a work of art. Secondly, the recent history of art furnishes examples of non-artifacts, such as rocks and stones, exhibited by artists in the name of art. If such non-artifacts are accepted as art, we might ask by what criterion they are to be distinguished from other non-artifacts, which are presumably not works of art. Perhaps these non-artifactual works differ in that they perceptually resemble certain paradigm works of art that are artifacts. Perceptual resemblance of this sort might render some non-artifacts suitable objects for 'artistic use'. However, as we have seen in the case of forgeries, neither perceptual resemblance to a bona fide work of art nor potential for 'artistic use' seem sufficient to establish the artistic credentials of an object. We are left with the problem,

therefore, of explaining how, if at all, certain non-artifacts can qualify as works of art.

- 3.) An analogous problem arises in connection with certain artifacts that have figured prominently in the recent annals of art history. Marcel Duchamp, in the 1930's, initiated the 'Readymade' tradition in the fine arts by exhibiting, in various Parisian art galleries, such mass-produced artifacts as a hat-rack, a snow shovel, and a urinal. Each 'work' was duly labelled and displayed as befits an artwork; the urinal, for instance, was entitled "Fountain", and the snow shovel "In Advance of the Broken Arm". Duchamp thereby achieved first notoriety and then canonisation within the church of art, and his influence can be seen in such recent developments as 'junk sculpture' and 'found art'. As with the non-artifactual 'artworks' discussed in '2', our intuitions are of little assistance in our attempts to grasp the 'arthood' of such works of art. It would seem that Duchamp's 'Readymades', as mass-produced artifacts, should be classified, with Ford automobiles, as non-art. And we might ask, again, as to the criterion by which such works are to be distinguished from other mass-produced artifacts which are not art. Perceptual resemblance to paradigm cases of art proves to be even less satisfactory as a criterion of 'arthood' in this context than it was in the case of non-artifactual artworks. For nothing will perceptually resemble Duchamp's snow shovel to a greater degree than other snow shovels of the same design. If perceptual resemblance to paradigms were the criterion of arthood in these cases, all snow shovels of the same design as Duchamp's would seem to have an equal claim to being artworks. Or would the other shovels, proffered by later artists as their works,

be forgeries of Duchamp's work?

4.) The first three puzzles suggest that the common man's intuitive distinction between art and non-art is incapable of rendering intelligible certain features of artistic practice. If any hopes be cherished that the intuitive distinction between 'artistic' and 'non-artistic' uses of objects will prove less fragile, they may soon be blasted by the following considerations. 'Artistic' use of the hard-back edition of Ulysses, we may recall, was taken to involve an engagement with the textual contents of the book. But such engagement, even if it is a necessary condition for 'artistic' use of the book, is clearly not a sufficient condition. For example, consider the case of a blackmailer who, desiring a particular word to complete a 'paste-up' blackmail note, engages in a sequential reading of the pages of Ulysses in the hope of finding what he is looking for. This, surely, should not count as an 'artistic' use of the book. Perhaps 'artistic' use of a literary work of art requires that the text be read in a certain way, but which ways of reading are to count as 'artistic' uses of a book? What about the reading of a psychiatrist who seeks, in the textual contents of Ulysses, confirmation of the hypothesis that Joyce was the victim of certain sexual neuroses?

'Artistic' use of an object, it might be claimed, involves attending to those properties of the object relevant to appreciating and understanding it as a work of art. But what is it to 'appreciate and understand something as a work of art'? What sort of properties are properly attended to in the furtherance of such activities? Attention to the text of a literary artwork is, as we have seen, at best a necessary condition for the 'artistic' use of the book containing the

text. Is knowledge not directly obtainable from an object of any relevance to appreciating and understanding the object as a work of art? More specifically, is knowledge of the artist's intentions in creating a given work either necessary or desirable for an adequate reception of the work? If one reads Kafka's The Trial as a perceptive statement on man's existential condition in the absence of God, and if Kafka intended the work as a satire on the modern bureaucratic state, is one's reading thereby rendered inadequate, or is it justifiable to the extent that it can be supported by reference to the text? As we shall see, persuasive arguments can be offered for either of these alternatives. Until such issues as this are resolved, however, the notion of 'appreciating and understanding something as a work of art' will be of little help in making more precise the notion of 'artistic use'.

The common man, if taxed with puzzles of this sort, might reaffirm his claim not to know much about art, and defer, on such matters, to the judgement of those less peripherally concerned with the arts, those whose principal business it is to create, present, perform, and critically evaluate works of art, and those whose principal pleasure it is to appreciate the same. But, if puzzlement over such matters is a mark of ignorance about art, the common man may be in better company than he thinks. For such matters may prove equally obscure to those whose practical acquaintance with the arts will presumably render them competent judges of any matter to which such acquaintance is pertinent. The problem, it would seem, is that, while these issues are profoundly practical in their implications, the puzzlement that they occasion can be dispell-

ed only by recourse to theoretical reflection. Practice poses, but cannot dispose of, such puzzles.

Why this is so becomes apparent when we consider the logical structure of the presented puzzles. For puzzlement in such cases arises in the context of an apparent conflict between the way we treat certain objects and the way that we ought to treat these objects. We relegate forgeries to the basement, for instance, when it seems that we ought to treat them as objects admitting of valuable 'artistic use'. The belief that we ought to treat forgeries, etc., in a certain way is partly derived from other features of our practical commerce with artworks and non-artworks, but it also reflects, in its normative force, certain more or less explicit assumptions as to the nature of art and artistic appreciation. The practitioner differs from the common man, perhaps, not in the absence of puzzlement but in the more explicit recognition of the underlying assumptions upon which his puzzlement is based. 'Common knowledge' about art is knowledge of 'paradigm' cases, knowledge that certain things are properly included within the extensions of the terms 'work of art' and 'artistic use' as those terms are customarily employed within the speaker's linguistic community. The common man also believes, quite reasonably, that other objects resembling the paradigms in relevant respects will also be properly included in the extensions of these terms. His 'ignorance' surfaces, however, when he is faced with cases which require a more explicit formulation of what are, and what are not, 'relevant respects' in this context. It is his ignorance of the principles governing the employment of these terms that renders him incapable of determining whether the terms are properly projectible over certain instances the artistic status of which has not been established by prior

usage. The practitioner, on the other hand, will usually be able to formulate in fairly precise terms the sorts of considerations that he takes to be relevant to the classification of objects as 'works of art', and of uses of objects as 'artistic uses'. Such formulations, together with more general beliefs that subsume them, provide the practitioner with a sort of 'working theory' of art, a loose framework of assumptions as to what is involved in being, and in being appreciated as, a work of art. The practitioner may acquire his 'working theory' in various ways - possibly through casual acquaintance with systematic theorising about art, but also, more significantly, through learning, or becoming 'initiated' into, a certain mode of discourse about art. The specialised language employed within a given community of practitioners of the arts reflects those more general assumptions about art maintained within that community; it does so by identifying certain features of objects as those features to which reference is properly made in discourse about those objects as works of art. In learning to apply the term 'cubist composition' to certain paintings, for example, the practitioner not only acquires beliefs about the properties properly attended to in these paintings, but also assimilates a more general theory as to the relevance of 'formal' properties to an object's being, and being appreciated as, a work of art.

The puzzlement of the practitioner arises because, in certain cases, his 'working theory' doesn't seem to work. His framework of beliefs about art suggests that forgeries ought to be treated in one way, yet the community treats them differently. To be puzzled about forgeries and related issues presupposes the acceptance of those assumptions about art which make up the 'working theory'. Such assumptions, fairly explic-

it in the beliefs of the practitioner, are implicitly contained in 'common knowledge' about art, such that their truth will readily be affirmed by the common man once they have been formulated for his consideration. Indeed, as will soon become apparent, I have tacitly introduced such assumptions in setting out, for the attention of the common man, the artistic puzzles sketched above.

If our assumptions lead us into difficulties, the obvious method of obviating our difficulties might be to reject our assumptions. If the entrenchment, or the apparent self-evidence, of our assumptions, makes such an option seem unappealing, we might seek instead some form of modus vivendi with our difficulties. In the present circumstances, however, another course of action recommends itself. For our assumptions are only a 'working theory', a loose and fairly unsystematic set of beliefs acquired piecemeal in an ongoing and lengthy interaction with works of art. The resolution of our difficulties might be sought, therefore, through the development of a more comprehensive and systematic account of art and artistic appreciation which would explicate and clarify our 'working' assumptions about art and, thereby, provide us with answers to the puzzles of artistic practice. Such a theory, capturing the 'essence' of art in a definition stating necessary and sufficient conditions for something's being a work of art, would allow us to understand why 'Readymades', for example, have an artistic status that other mass-produced artifacts lack by making explicit those conditions of arthood that the former, but not the latter, are able to satisfy.

The formulation of such a definition of art has traditionally been taken to be the principal task facing the philosopher of art. Furthermore, those philosophers who have taken up this task have generally con-

curred in the belief that the 'working' assumptions about art which underly artistic puzzlement are fundamentally correct, requiring clarification rather than replacement. In the following three chapters I shall attempt to determine, firstly, what these assumptions are, and, secondly, how traditional theorists of art have set about giving them a more systematic formulation.
