

## AESTHETIC CONTEXTUALISM

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Let me begin with a quote: “The universal organum of philosophy—the ground stone of its entire architecture—is the philosophy of art.”<sup>1</sup> This statement, made in 1800 by the German Idealist philosopher Friedrich Schelling, is rather striking, not only because of its grandiosity, but also because it contrasts with what the majority of contemporary philosophers would be prepared to say on the subject. There is nevertheless a grain of truth in the claim that there is a peculiar connection between art and philosophy and in the claim that aesthetics is a central area of philosophy. First of all, it is worth noting that, even if the philosophy of art has not played a role in the systems of all the indisputably great philosophers, or even of most of them, it has occupied an important place in the thought of quite a few, among them Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Hegel and Sartre. And a good number of philosophers of lesser rank—including Croce, Collingwood, Dewey, Bergson, Santayana, Gadamer and, evidently, Schelling, also had a philosophy of art; one finds them perhaps more interested in it than in, say, ethics. Why this natural, even if not inevitable, link between philosophy and art?

Well, both art and philosophy are concerned with ultimate value, with what makes life worth living. In both art and philosophy, expression, clarification, and formulation are important, though whether the content of what is expressed, clarified and formulated in art and in philosophy is the same is another matter. Both domains are singularly and significantly products of mind, products rooted in cultures that

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<sup>1</sup> Schelling (1800), p. 544.

testify to the nature of those cultures perhaps more loudly and clearly than anything else in them.

But that philosophy should interest itself in art cannot rest merely on the similarities between them. Rather more likely, it rests on the fact that art is such a pervasive phenomenon, occupying an important place in all cultures, and that it both, on the one hand, offers a unique window into the workings of the human mind, and on the other hand, promises to reveal aspects of the world in which that mind is embedded, ones that remain resistant to other modes of inquiry or exploration.

Let us consider for a moment this revelatory dimension of art. It is quite possible that art today plays a role that was previously played principally by religion, though of course even today religion still plays that role for many. Art performs certain functions that were once manifestly reserved to religion: for example, investing things with significance, inviting us to look beyond ourselves, promising contact with what is most real, introducing a ritual character into everyday existence (think of certain behaviors adopted at concerts, at poetry readings, or in art galleries). But does art, strictly speaking, convey truths, or especially deep ones? Does it do so by means different from those of ordinary language and science, and if so, how?

These are difficult questions, ones that have lately attracted the attention of aestheticians, and they concern the abstract arts such as music as much as representational arts such as literature. Concerning the former, it has been proposed that music, or at least some music, can embody and communicate to the listener states of being or possible ways of being human that were not evident to him before, and for which the experience of listening attentively may constitute a fundamental means of access. Concerning the latter, according to some the comprehending experience of a literary work such as a novel or a play may promote ethical or psychological understanding of a fundamentally practical or concrete sort, one that goes beyond what is possible through ethics or psychology themselves, or beyond the simple formulation in propositional terms of the message of a work. These claims raise very difficult issues in the epistemology and philosophy of mind of aesthetic experience, and I do not pretend to have established them here.

To return to the connection between art and religion, though, one may suppose this: if God exists, and if He is a personal or quasi-personal being, then what better way could there be to suggest His presence without declaring it explicitly than by giving human beings the capacity to create and to appreciate sublime works of art,

works that seem to transport them beyond themselves and thereby gainsay the idea that they are simply the products of natural evolution? At first blush, none.

So much for the highest, quasi-religious ambitions of art. Let me now turn to the role of the philosopher in relation to art. Why should artists and the public concern themselves with what philosophers of art have to say? It is true that a great number of people are in search of experiences that art may be distinctively able to afford, involving self-expression, enlargement of perspective, access to new states of mind, and acquisition of moral or psychological insights. That is to say, people are naturally interested in art, whether on the productive or the receptive end. But one may wonder if there really are *philosophical* ideas concerning art to which art makers and art lovers should pay more attention than they have heretofore done. That is, one may wonder whether the art-interested should be interested in *aesthetics* in the philosophical sense.

Barnett Newman, the abstract color-field painter, notoriously replied in the negative, at least for those who make art, when he remarked that “aesthetics is for artists as ornithology is for the birds”.

In a sense, I agree with Newman. For the first thing to say on this issue is that the fundamental justification for aesthetics is as philosophy; that is, as an intellectual activity engaged in by philosophers and for philosophers. That means that aesthetic problems are philosophical problems; they belong in the same family as the problems of metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, etcetera, to which they bear a family resemblance. The question then becomes why should any one who is not a philosopher be interested in what philosophers think or say about anything? Well, it is evident that anyone who is not a professional philosopher may nonetheless have philosophical interests, philosophical curiosity, and ponder questions of a philosophical nature. So long as that is so, why should such individuals not then consult professionals, that is, the folk who spend a lot of time considering such questions and who are trained to address them in a manner that is more fruitful, or at least more coherent, more systematic, and more explicitly reasoned, than that of others when considering such questions? Given that many people seem disposed to think philosophically about what they most love or what is most important to them, and given that for many people art and aesthetic experience fill that bill, their interest in philosophical aesthetics seems almost assured.

So much for the rationale, for at least many of the art-interested, of looking to

philosophical aesthetics for illumination. When one looks, though, what does one find? Among the philosophical insights about art that contemporary aesthetics offers regarding the creation, ontology, meaning, interpretation, and evaluation of works of art, for my part I would be inclined to give pride of place to what I will call *contextualism*. Contextualism about art is opposed, on the one hand, to different sorts of formalism, structuralism, and empiricism, and on the other hand, to different sorts of relativism, nihilism, and deconstructionism.

I will first explain what I mean by contextualism about art, then briefly sketch some of those contrasting perspectives. Contextualism is the thesis that a work of art is an artifact of a particular sort, an object or structure that is the product of human invention at a particular time and place, by a particular individual or individuals, and that that fact has consequences for how one properly experiences, understands, and evaluates works of art. For contextualism, artworks are essentially historically embedded objects, ones that have neither art status, nor determinate identity, nor clear aesthetic properties, nor definite aesthetic meanings, outside or apart from the generative contexts in which they arise and in which they are preferred.

To get a better handle on what artworks are on a contextualist conception of them one can draw useful analogies with the notions of utterance, action, and achievement. A contextually-situated artwork is akin in different ways to an utterance made in a specific linguistic situation, an action performed in specific historical circumstances, and an achievement of a particular individual working under specific constraints on a specific problem within a given domain. Had the historical context been different, the work itself would have been different, because the artistic utterance it makes, the artistic actions it incarnates, the artistic achievement it embodies, would invariably have been different. And all such differences entail other differences in what the work represents, expresses, or exemplifies in aesthetically relevant ways. ‘No work is an island’ is a good slogan to epitomize contextualism about art, and Jorge Luis Borges’ celebrated story ‘Pierre Ménard, Author of the *Quixote*’, which turns on the idea of textually identical but artistically distinct literary works, remains the best, albeit fictional, object lesson in why aesthetic contextualism is unavoidable if we are to make proper sense of how artworks are created, interpreted, and assessed.

Contextualism contrasts with all the other views mentioned in passing above. Formalism in art states that as far as appreciation is concerned, manifest form is the only important thing in art, that the art status, art content, and art value of an artwork

reside in its form alone. But if contextualism is right, objects that share the same manifest form may in fact not have the same status, content or value as art works. As Arthur Danto has famously underlined, for every artwork there could be a perceptually indistinguishable object that is either an artwork entirely distinct from it in meaning or an object that is not an artwork at all. Empiricism in art affirms that the essence of an art work lies in its perceptual aspects, in its manifest qualities; therefore, understanding an art work requires nothing beyond perceiving it, without concern for its historical provenance or the problematic from which it emerged. Again, if contextualism is right, then empiricism about art cannot be. A keynote of structuralism in aesthetics, as related to but distinct from formalism and empiricism, is the idea that certain manifest structures, motifs or patterns, in whatever medium or style or period, have a given aesthetic valence or force, regardless of how they are incorporated or employed. Structuralism is thus a form of optimism about aesthetic universals locatable at the level of manifest form. But again, if contextualism is correct, the pretensions of structuralism are misguided and its optimism misplaced.

As for relativism about art, it is the thesis that what a work of art means, what aesthetic content it possesses, what aesthetic value one may accord it, are all relative to individual perceivers or classes of perceivers. If such a view is to be opposed, in favor of a modest objectivism about art, it becomes imperative to understand, in contextualist fashion, what makes something an artwork to begin with (in my view, a certain kind of history-invoking governing intention); what sort of object an artwork is, once it is constituted as such (in my view, a historically-tethered structure or particular structure); and how the meaning and content of a work are generated (in my view, as a function of both the work's manifest form and the work's context of emergence).

Finally, there is deconstructionism, a particularly virulent Gallic variety of relativism. Deconstructionism maintains that there are no stable or consistent meanings in any discourse, including written texts, because every discourse in some way undermines itself from within. This is not the place for a treatise on deconstructionism and its ills, but it seems to me that its central error is to conclude that because the force or content of an utterance—whether a conversational remark, a newspaper article, a lyrical poem, or a fictional narrative—can sometimes be put into question by focusing peculiarly on its ‘margins’, ‘gaps’, or ‘aporias’, that the utterance therefore has no central, intersubjectively demonstrable force or content.

Be that as it may, the more sophisticated and firm one's contextualism is, the less one will be tempted to give in to the semantic indeterminacy promised by deconstructionism—an indeterminacy that, let it be noted, is amply fueled by formalist, empiricist, and structuralist tendencies examined a short while ago, since in freeing a work from its intentional, historical, stylistic and categorical moorings, one opens the door fairly wide to such indeterminacy of content. In this respect, deconstructionism is but the natural—if rotten—fruit of formalism and structuralism in regard to art.

A noncontextualist, e.g. structuralist, formalist, or empiricist, view of what artworks are, or of what they mean, or of how they relate to their makers and the surrounding social world, is just an unnecessarily restrictive and impoverished one. Art is a much richer, more interesting, more important thing if rightly seen as the product of historically placed individuals with aims and intentions, thoughts and feelings, working to communicate contents or convey experiences through concrete media, rather than as mere abstract forms or patterns whose provenance, antecedents, and culturally rooted significance might all be put aside or bracketed as far as appreciation was concerned. Viewed in abstraction from their human context, the objects of art have no more claim on our attention than the forms and patterns of nature, and no greater potential for meaning. Of course, natural objects can be beautiful and partake of other aesthetic properties, but the content of art goes beyond that. In addition, the aesthetic qualities that an object possesses as an artwork will in general differ from those of an observationally indiscernible natural object or nonartwork artifact.

Another benefit of a contextualist perspective on art, in practical terms, is this. It's a useful resource for combating some of the classic knee-jerk reactions of philistinism as regards avant-garde or outré art. For example, the remark, "that's been done before" said of something perceptually similar to some earlier work. Once you see that art is something *done*, rather than merely a certain *appearance*, it's not so clear that it has been done before. Or the even more dismissive, "my little brother could have done that". But could he, really, have done *that*? In other words, would what your brother could have done have had the same import as what the actual artist, with his preexisting oeuvre, managed to do? Or consider the familiar anti-elitist proclamation, "an exact copy of a Rembrandt is artistically just as good as an original Rembrandt". If an artwork has a historical dimension, is a person-and time-bound creation, exhibits

a style, and embodies an achievement, then such a proclamation is doubtful. The original painting is the site and vehicle of Rembrandt's artistic accomplishment, and so immeasurably more valuable, not only monetarily but artistically, than any replica of it.

Let me enter some further clarifications regarding the sort of contextualism defended here. First, the perspective I advocate on the appreciation of art is concerned not so much with *explaining* how the work came to be, in the causal sense, but in *understanding* what it expresses or communicates; if artworks are not to collapse into natural objects, then a grasp of cultural-historical context is necessary for the latter, whatever role it might play in the former. Second, as far as artistic meaning is concerned, it is not the actual, possibly inaccessible semantic intentions of artists that matter, but rather the intentions most reasonably hypothesized to have governed the making of a work, by appropriately placed audiences in possession of relevant information on the work's context of creation; only then can the utterance that is the artist's work be rightly grasped.<sup>2</sup> Third, the idea that what one must do in appreciation is "focus on the work itself", which seems unobjectionable, doesn't get you anywhere without a defensible conception of what the work is, and as I have tried to suggest, a contextualist, temporally-situated, utterance-based conception of artworks is demonstrably superior to a formalist or empiricist one. Fourth, the idea that if the artist doesn't know what something in his or her work means then no one knows, as well as the idea that the artist has a privileged access to his or her own mental states, is not one that can be seriously proposed after Wittgenstein. What an artist's work means, in whole or in part, may very well be clearer to well-placed others than to him or her. In addition, what a *work*, as an utterance in a context means is not always the same as what the *artist*, on that occasion of utterance, may have meant by producing the work. Finally, of course it should be a goal of interacting with art, on any theory of art, that one connect with what is really in the work, and precisely through the forms and structures--e.g. words, colors, sounds, shapes--that are its perceivable core, and on which any further qualities and meanings it possesses depend. But that is

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<sup>2</sup> There is, however, an ineliminable role played by certain actual intentions, ones regarding a work's status as art and as a particular sort of artwork, e.g. poem, sculpture, and these just do need to be ascertained as far as possible, or else the interpretive and appreciative project cannot properly get off the ground. On the distinction between semantic and categorial intentions in regard to art, see my "Intention and Interpretation in Literature," in *The Pleasures of Aesthetics*.

hardly inconsistent with the demand that, if one wants to experience and understand a work of art as such, rather than merely “get off on it”, one must see those forms and structures not as coming out of nowhere, nor as having dropped from heaven, but as the choice of a particular historically and culturally situated individual working in a particular medium, with its own inherited conventions and associations. Approaching a work “blind”, that is, without any contextual situating or positioning of it, may sometimes be fun or otherwise experientially rewarding, but it is not approaching art as a human expressive and communicative activity.

I have not by any means made a full case for contextualism here, but such a case could certainly be constructed from the recent literature in aesthetics, and the contributions of Danto and Walton in particular. No one who works through the plethora of examples in that literature could fail to see, I think, that contextualism about the nature and content of artworks is warranted, even if reasonable disagreement remains as to its degree and scope.<sup>3</sup> Contextualism is virtually forced upon us as the best account or explanation of our long-standing practices of experiencing, describing, criticizing, evaluating, and reflecting on works of art. Structures or forms *per se*, detached from their emplacements in traditions, styles, oeuvres, and historical moments, are simply incapable of conveying the meanings, significances and resonances that informed criticism and response to artworks normally ascribes to them.

Let us consider next the relationship between art and science. Art and science are, no doubt, related activities: both presuppose creativity and imagination, and both, perhaps, are involved in the search for truth. But they are not identical pursuits, and they are not governed by the same criteria of meaning and value. The number theorems of Ramanujan and the space-time theory of Einstein are not as such vehicles of artistic expression or communication, and unsurprisingly, neither are they tied to particular contexts. When it comes to science, what interests us is exclusively the content of what is conveyed, not the means whereby it is conveyed. But when it comes to art, things are otherwise. A focus on content as conveyed by specific form in specific circumstances is virtually definitive of an aesthetic interest in an object, and

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<sup>3</sup> See, especially, Borges; (1970) and (1970a); Gombrich (1963); Walton, (1970); Sagoff, (1978); Dutton (1979); Levinson (1980); Wollheim, (1980); Danto (1981); Baxandall, (1985); and Currie (1989).

an artwork in particular.<sup>4</sup>

Some have pointed to the existence of universals in art across human cultures as reason to resist a thoroughly contextualist view of them. And the evidence does seem to suggest that there are such universals to be found. For example, there seems to be a general preference for savannahlike landscapes, due to the circumstances of humankind's pre-history, and there seems to be a propensity in musical systems to favor the octave, the fifth, and, to a lesser extent, the third, which may be rooted in the physics of vibrating strings. But such facts are hardly enough to suggest that most of the meaning and effect of art resides in form or appearance alone, independent of the contexts in which such forms and appearances are embedded.

Consider a red tree, a swastika, a curving line, a diminished seventh chord, an expletive. These signify or convey or evoke one thing in one context--say, Mondrian's expressionist landscapes, Nazi propaganda films, Ingres's portraits of odalisques, Mozart's symphonies, D. H. Lawrence's novels--and something else in another--say, Matisse's decorative interiors, ancient Indian art, Kandinsky's abstractions, Wagner's operas, David Mamet's plays. Or take matters of allusion, quotation, parody, satire, adaptation, variation, repudiation, homage, which are widespread in the arts; these common artistic phenomena are inexplicable on an acontextual view of artworks. To offer just one example, whatever meaning or value Woody Allen's 1980 film *Stardust Memories* possesses is simply not detachable from its evident reference to, modeling after, and commentary upon Fellini's 1963 film *8 1/2*.

Let me address finally the question of the degree of intellectuality of response appropriate to art. An appreciator doesn't have to be able to articulate intellectually the cultural context, background knowledge, or cognitive orientation requisite for experiencing a work correctly, that is, as the historically situated utterance or offering it is, he or she simply needs to *possess* it. But by and large one acquires what's needed by osmosis from the culture and wide experience in the artform in question. What Richard Wollheim calls "cognitive stock," or Leonard Meyer "internalized norms," and what they hold essential to the adequate appreciation, respectively, of painting and music, are largely tacitly acquirable, and may also not be readily acquirable in discursive fashion. What is needed are basically style- and period-relative habits of response.

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<sup>4</sup> See "What Is Aesthetic Pleasure?" in Levinson (1996).

In conclusion, let me just say that of course experience of art is the most important thing, and the impact of art its primary *raison d'être*. But that does not mean that such experience and such impact are not inevitably and properly culturally mediated and historically informed. To think otherwise, once again, risks reducing our engagement with art to our engagement with mere patterns, however striking or beautiful. But art is more than just patterns—it encompasses the entire human soul, in its infinite variety.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For other works subscribing to or acknowledging the influence of aesthetic contextualism, more recent than those noted above, see the following: Currie (1991); Fisher (1991); Goehr (1992); Stecker (1997); Morizot (1999); Pouivet (1999); Davies (2001); Howell (2002a); Howell (2002b); Rohrbaugh (2003); Davies (2003).

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