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## **The Ancient Quarrel Between Art and Philosophy in Contemporary**

### **Exhibitions of Visual Art.**

Introductory Essay <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12282>

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#### ABSTRACT

At a time when professional art criticism is on the wane, the ancient quarrel between art and philosophy demands fresh answers. Professional art criticism provided a basis upon which to distinguish apt experiences of art from the idiosyncratic. However, currently the kind of narratives from which critics once drew are underplayed or discarded in contemporary exhibition design where the visual arts are concerned. This leaves open the possibility that art operates either as mere stimulant to private reverie or, in the more contentful cases, as propaganda. The ancient quarrel between art and philosophy is that art influences surreptitiously while philosophy presents reasons that invite rational scrutiny. As such, in contrast to philosophy, art would undermine our agency. In July 2017, a group of philosophers gathered at the Art Gallery of NSW (AGNSW), in Sydney, Australia, in the presence of two AGNSW curators to explore the basis of their own experiences of selected artworks. Here, those commentaries are reproduced. Each reveal that objective grounds for an experience of art can be based in the community from which one draws one's terms of reference. In our commentaries we see the expertise of the respective philosophical communities but other communities of culture or expertise might serve the same purpose and

hence resolve the ancient quarrel. Before hearing these commentaries, I explain what is at stake when the ancient quarrel between art and philosophy is understood in contemporary terms. This Issue of the *Curator* also includes an article on the community-based art criticism that emerges from these commentaries followed by an exhibition review which reveals the incorrigible impulse (also demonstrated in the commentaries) to find the basis for the most apt experience of an artwork. A response by the AGNSW curators completes this issue.



Figure 1. Speakers and audience assemble for the Philosophical Intervention Symposium at the AGNSW on July 15, 2017 in front of Ai Weiwei, *Forever* 2003. © Ai Weiwei. Photo: © artsense.edu.au [Color figure can be viewed at <http://artsense.edu.au/workshop-2017-photos/>]

## WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ART CRITICISM?

This discussion is limited to those institutions like the Art Gallery of N.S.W (AGNSW) which collect and preserve examples of visual art from various traditions with an emphasis on

understanding the visual-art-heritage of their citizens. European, Australian Indigenous, Asian and Middle Eastern, African and American traditions are all relevant to understanding Australian visual-art. It is important to note that this enquiry is not about visual culture generally but the narrower focus of visual art which is the purview of institutions like the AGNSW.

Artworks take their place within a world of images. The twenty-first century has seen the artworld dissolve into a plethora of practices, where the art- gallery-museum takes its place as one of many public spaces which occasion experiences of entertainment, reflection, and communication about a range of topical issues (see Hein 2007: 79-81). A gallery visitor once might have felt it incumbent upon them to read about the art historical context of a work and the art critic's view of its meaning and significance to the artworld. However, today art is often understood as a statement on a topical issue, while many visitors simply immerse themselves in images, videos or environments which strike them as evocative, not unlike the way they engage with music videos or the visual spectacle offered by a rock concert. The concepts through which an art-gallery visitor understands their experience might be drawn from popular culture rather than confined to professional art commentary (McMahon and Gilchrist 2017; and see Said 2005: 58-59).

For example, many media outlets have dropped the art critic's regular commentary. It has been suggested that this is because art critiques are relevant to only those who live in the vicinity of the relevant exhibition while online media outlets aim to capture much larger audiences.<sup>1</sup> However, for the traditional art exhibition viewer, the art critique served as more than advertisement. The possibility of meaning-making requires a critical as well as receptive interface, and the art critic created this kind of context. The critic would defend an interpretation and a judgment with clear reasons in the form of metaphors, analogies and

prior examples; and when effective, the viewer could then approach the work with the configurations and construals with which the critic had equipped them.

Some of the reasons for the demise of the art critic might also include a concern for diversity, multi-perspectives and inclusion. One would not want to exclude those not interested in art historical classifications and artworld theories from engaging with visual art. But when there is nothing to get wrong, there is nothing to get right either. There is scope for treating visual art as visual journalism but this does not speak to the way visual art can reflect ideas or norms emerging within the zeitgeist of our times. The artist often feels their way and it would take the art critic to articulate what was emerging in their work. This is what distinguished their work from propaganda. One had to be party to what one understood by the work. This crucial aspect of the artworld is traditionally what attracted many art gallery visitors.

Richard Rorty discussed an issue in literary criticism along similar lines (Curthoys 2014). Literary criticism was seen by Rorty as an opportunity to draw the lines of ethical norms in new places and configure the shape of hope in new images. That is, it was not about the retrieval of what this or that author had in mind, but rather what was constructed by a community of readers at a particular time in history. Rorty argued that the progress of morality has had more to do with sentimentality, and opportunities to find objects worthy of our sentiments, than anything delivered up by clear analytic reasoned discourse, and that literature played a role in providing such opportunities.<sup>2</sup> Could we ascribe this role to visual art also?

The trouble with this view of things though is that sentiments can be dumb and fickle; and manipulating sentiment can be dangerous compared to persuading with reasoned argument. Aristotle recommended the politician or orator use rhetoric on a general audience because they would not be persuaded by reason alone. But rhetoric is manipulative. Unless

reason is brought to bear upon such persuasive meaning-making, people can be persuaded to beliefs that in more reasoned and less sentimental contexts they would reject. What does this mean for the diverse multi-voice all-inclusive engagement art-museums-galleries now foster?

However, diversity is not necessarily a case of relativism as Paul Guyer's aesthetic pluralism reveals in his commentary to follow. And as we will see in David Macarthur, Michael Newall and Mohan Matthen's commentaries, art can be experienced in a way which is grounded in objective terms of reference other than art historical classifications and art theoretical knowledge. All the authors of the commentaries that follow, even those who do base their experiences at least in part on the art critic's traditional concerns, such as Cynthia Freeland and Robert Sinnerbrink, explain the touchstone for their experience in their philosophical preoccupations. And the traditions and debates that ground these preoccupations constitute the philosophical communities from which they draw their terms of reference. While the communities of art historians and critics have less influence in the way art-gallery-museums attempt to engage their visitors, other communities have taken their place. So as we hope to demonstrate through the following commentaries, while the communicative capacity of art has arguably splintered according to the community in which one derives the concepts that shape one's experience (McDowell 1996), this does not necessarily suggest that art acts upon us as rhetoric. Professional art criticism may have been overtaken by contemporary conditions such as social media and cultural diversity, but community-based practices may have filled the gap.

#### THE ANCIENT QUARREL: ARISTOTLE AND KANT ON RHETORIC

Before proceeding to the commentaries, it is worth examining how the practices associated with what we now consider the creative arts could have so threatened some in the ancient world, to see whether the conditions today are any different. Aristotle thought that art could

actually be exploited to achieve one's goals. According to Aristotle, the substance of rhetorical persuasion works mainly by arousing prejudice, pity, anger and similar emotions. The modes of persuasion adopted by a rhetorician depend upon her personal character and a consideration of who her audience is, because she would need to put her audience into a certain frame of mind in order to effect change in their attitudes. By rhetoric, the audience is made to feel that the very proof of the position promoted is the rhetoric itself. In this sense, art has been thought of as an example of rhetoric. Aristotle thought that to uncover what the audience sees as in their interest is to uncover the persuasive facts and this is what the rhetorician exploits one way or another.

If art exploits rhetoric, then the artist is something of a politician. We might think, like Immanuel Kant, that this is too narrow an understanding of what art can be. Kant distinguished between poetry and the best speeches of skilled orators. Beautiful speeches, he thought, used rhetoric which involved moving people "like machines" by "using the weakness of people for one's own purposes (however well intentioned ...)" to reach a judgment that in "calm reflection" might "lose all weight for them".<sup>3</sup> Poetry, on the other hand, according to Kant, afforded pure enjoyment. So poetry, like beautiful speeches, evoked an experience of beauty, but whereas the beauty of the speech exploits one's desires in order to influence, the beauty of poetry simply inspired reflection.

Nonetheless, if reflection is anything more than personal reverie or daydreaming, that is, if we are going to claim that the reflection inspired by art increases understanding, and this is surely what those who would claim a serious cultural role for art would accept, then the onus is on us to explain how art can achieve this by means other than rhetoric. In other words, the ancient quarrel in the contemporary context still requires an answer.

IMAGINING: INSIGHT OR DELUSION?

The meaning and significance we ascribe to any particular artwork is not easily conveyed; that is, if you hope to bring another person to *perceive* the same meaning *in the work*. You would need to understand the basis of the metaphors, analogies or prior examples called upon by your interlocutor. Let's call the meaning and significance of an artwork its particular "insight" to distinguish it from literal messages.

If we gain insight from art, our insight is based on impressions and images created by an artist whose relation to fact is stipulated by herself, hence a kind of fiction. This is where the connection with imagining is typically made. As such, the characteristic engagement with art is a form of imagining.

The association of imagining with art is where the ancient quarrel with philosophy gains traction. Unless art is mere entertainment and diversion, it must be a source of knowledge, or insight: at its most effecting, it can be a new way of understanding, experiencing or feeling. But if insight is based on a state of imagining prompted by art, then in effect we are claiming that we gain insight from imagining. But the artist invents and creates rather than discovers. And to recognize what the artwork means we must recognize something we already knew. So belief formed on the basis of art is either delusional (on imagining) or trivial (you already knew it). A closer look at the nature of imagining not only resolves this issue, but also supports a role for diverse communities in grounding the meaning ascribed to art. First I consider the constraints on imagining before returning to the role of diverse communities, as demonstrated in our commentaries, for a robust visual art culture within art galleries-museums.

### ***The Plausibility Constraint on Imagining***

When used instructively such as in problem-solving, imagination results in learning about the world. In this mode, imagination is anchored in reality and is under certain constraints (Kind

and Kung 2016). But bear in mind that when imagining is used in problem solving, new facts are never acquired on the basis of that imagining alone.

In scientific and legal reasoning, for example, belief is never based on an hypothesis (which is where imagining comes in) but rather the results of the experiment or research that is guided by the hypothesis. In contrast, imagining prompted by art does not involve forming hypotheses which are subsequently tested. We do not delay our experience of insight until we get the opportunity to test the hypothesis. Instead, the quality of the imagining prompts further reflection which prompts further imagining. Insight emerges from this process if at all.

It is often supposed that imagining can “fly completely free of reality” such as when engaged in day dreaming and fantasy; and as art does not fit into an explicit problem-solving mode, it is commonly associated with this unconstrained flying-free-of-reality type of imaginative engagement (Kind 2016).<sup>4</sup> But if art were an occasion for this kind of unconstrained imagining, then artistic insight would be ungrounded and delusional.

But this claim can be mitigated somewhat when we consider the nature of imagining further. Art and its references must be plausible to engage imagining. So like hypothesizing, artistic imagining is constrained by actual world plausibility. But unlike hypothesizing, the fact that the imaginings are plausible is itself the spark to reflection in art, and one’s reflection fuels further imagining.

That is, we cannot separate the artistic world entirely from the actual world in the processes which constitute imagining (cf., Walton 1990, 274). This is nicely borne out by the commentaries to follow. Imagining in engaging with art involves a continual interaction with real world constraints. The reflection prompted by art when it is ultimately experienced as insightful, is part of the relevant imagining: it enriches and motivates it.



This is perhaps most obvious where emotions and feelings are concerned. For example, when we are required to link feelings and objects in entirely new ways, such as finding something funny or surprising that would not be funny or surprising in the actual world, our subjectivity becomes disengaged and imagining stops. We could apply this to values and morality also in the same way. We disengage when expected to adopt values we do not hold.<sup>5</sup> This is an example of the plausibility constraint on imagining. There might be implausible things which we are meant to entertain but even in comic book scenarios and Science Fiction, unless our subjectivities are hooked into possible scenarios, reflect goals or intentions which we find coherent and plausible, our attention will flag.

But while this addresses the problem of delusion, the problem it raises is that it would seem impossible to actually learn anything new from art. Consider that the main outlines of imagining are stipulated by the artwork's imagery, but it is the actual world inferences that are generated by us that hook our subjectivity into reflecting upon it. It is only when imaginings are felt to be significantly interwoven through with our actual world reflections that a work is experienced as insightful. Given that plausibility is based on our experience, knowledge and training, we would simply become disengaged if art genuinely threw up something new because, based on our experience, knowledge and training, it would just seem implausible. So what could insight be if not a case of learning something new?

### ***The Ascription of Meaning and Significance***

The commentaries suggest that while it is true that what we already know constrains our reception to art, the meaning and significance of what we thought we knew can be changed by an artwork. Research analysed by the philosopher Tamar Szabó Gendler provides a way of understanding this point.

Gendler reports on research that shows that a process known as priming in the psychological literature alters the configuration of sets of beliefs. For example, priming can change what is foregrounded and backgrounded in our belief system (2006a and 2006b).<sup>6</sup> While it does not involve the acquisition of new beliefs, it does influence the way memory items are associated. For example, once a range of events and images are experienced as associated together, subsequently if one of the items is triggered, the whole set comes to mind including the values and connotations attached to them. Such sets of associations or beliefs are called schemata in psychology. The way beliefs are related within schemata influences behaviour: an environmental trigger can determine what we notice, select, prioritize in our surroundings and in some cases, our subsequent social interactions. The contents of our schemata in large part are thought to constitute the meaning we ascribe to experience.

Priming can also influence the threshold at which evidence is considered adequate for belief. So for example, if a person resembles a war-time enemy, even though the context has changed, it might take less evidence to convince you that the person who bears a resemblance to the enemy has perpetrated some crime. The upside of priming is a certain economy in the use of our cognitive resources; for example, we recognise a great deal about our environment just by such triggers without having to consciously note every detail. But of course the downside is that in some cases it constitutes prejudice.

Significantly for us, Gendler reports that priming is source indifferent; that is, which beliefs come to be associated together within a particular schema can just as easily be brought together and subsequently stored in memory based on imagining as from perception of actual world events. Schemata are formed equally effectively whether their source is perception or imagining. But imagining has to involve our subjectivity, our feelings, in order to impact upon our schemata in this way, and as we have seen, this will be constrained by plausibility.

Nonetheless, the source indifference of priming suggests that art can contribute to the way beliefs are linked, how they are prioritized, and consequently, the psychological salience they subsequently hold for us.

This research helps us to understand how art can have an impact on our understanding without providing us with new beliefs. However, it raises again the problem with which we started. When art is found insightful it is because it has impacted upon our attitudes, and in turn will have some impact on our goals, intentions, or behavior. This suggests that we allow the artist an authority which is the very thing Plato objected to when he banned artists from the Ideal Republic.

#### INSIGHT VERSES RHETORIC: RESOLVING THE ANCIENT QUARREL

I have argued above that art can cause us to feel, notice or attend to things in the actual world in new ways. This leads to the problem of rhetoric and manipulation. Unless the content of this “insight” can be noted, critiqued and revised, then artistic insight would operate on us just like the rhetoric that Aristotle thought politicians must learn to master and that Kant thought made us respond “like machines”. This would suggest that art deploys the same processes exploited by advertising or propaganda (and hence explains why Plato banned art).

Attempting to translate a work into explicit reasons trivialises it (Stolnitz 1992; cf. Rowe 2009 and Hurley 2009) because imagining eludes such attempts. However, on the one hand, what one is able to perceive as the meaning of a work depends on one’s experience, knowledge and training and on the other, whether one is inclined to perceive meaning in a work depends on the artwork itself providing the occasion to engage one in imagining that is not only plausible but also related in effective ways to one’s own goals and interests. As such, art *can* prompt the kind of imagining that engages reasons. The philosopher Peter Langland-Hassan identifies three features that characterise the cognitive architecture of imaginings

(2016, 63) which can usefully be applied to this question. First he observes that there is initial involvement of top-down intentions which in the case of imagining prompted by art, would involve stipulations made by the artist. And these prompt automatic inferences generated by us. Second, as imagining proceeds there are certain lateral constraints on what can be imagined. This means that the automatic inferences generated by us are based on our experience, knowledge and training. Thirdly, there is cyclical involvement of top-down intentions throughout the course of an imagining which involves the impact of our goals and interests on how we focus, what we emphasize and dwell upon and in turn, this influences the subsequent imagining. As you can see, such a structure allows a considerable variation between audience members in how they engage with any particular work.

We can now see that it is the impact of our intentions on imagining that is crucial in distinguishing artistic insight from the effects of rhetoric; because it involves a critical reflection on the implications of the images and metaphors we engage with. Again, this is very aptly drawn out and demonstrated by the commentaries in this issue. Contemporary art in particular, shows the kind of investment required of us in order to engage with it as can be seen in Macarthur's commentary on Thomas Demand's "Modell/Model" (2000) and Sinnerbrink on Weiwei's "Forever" (2003).

A key feature of artistic insight which is demonstrated by the following commentaries is that we recognise and endorse an attitude toward a theme in the work when it resonates with our actual world concerns. We acquire images from an artwork, but their significance is represented, uncovered or constructed by us, and those images can stay with us, in terms of the way they orientate us to relevant aspects of the world.<sup>7</sup> So the solution to the ancient quarrel between art and philosophy as it manifests in contemporary terms, involves recognizing that the imagining prompted by art operates under the constraints of experience

and plausibility. When it is found memorable and impactful, it is because we gain understanding relative to our goals and interests.

An implication of this response to the distinction between art and rhetoric is that the significance of any particular work cannot be fixed across diverse communities. An artistic trope for one group might be the expression of a cultural bias for another. Furthermore, we construct mental images not only in response to explicit images or suggestions, but in response to ellipses in the imagery. The images we carry away from an artwork might signify possibilities the details of which depend on our emotional and cognitive resources. Affective force, plausibility and reflection are all involved, but whether and how they manifest depends on the resources of the audience.

#### DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

The range of possible meaning-ascriptions is not necessarily a recipe for relativism. The meanings ascribed to works might be relative to particular communities but within those communities, even the process involved in attempting to make one's responses understood by one's peers involves the calibration of terms of reference and in turn the gradual alignment of the values associated with them. There may not be just one community with its one overarching hierarchy of terms of reference, as was once set by art critics, art historians and curators, but rather a range of communities with their own sets of terms of reference (cf. Hein 1993).<sup>8</sup> In the commentaries which follow, the responses demonstrate the degree to which when art is experienced, it is experienced in virtue of the community from which one has developed one's interests, and from which one has adopted one's terms of reference. In our case, the various communities of philosophers that have formed around particular themes or debates create the conditions by which our philosophers can communicate their responses.

If art can be insightful then there is something in the work; and the audience seeks to interpret it. This may be compatible with a range of aspects and perspectives but interpretations can be disengaging unless one can find a solid basis for it in the work. Freud got that right when he argued that a person's daydreams lose interest for anyone other than the daydreamer; but creative work (Freud was specifically referring to creative writing) finds an objective base to engage others (1908 [1959]). So when there are a variety of perspectives on a work we typically judge one to be more apt than another based on the reasons put forward.

To engage in an episode of meaning-making that is something other than sentiment or rhetoric, is to enter the space of reasons. Reasons are vulnerable to disagreement and it is this aspect that occasions learning from another's perspective. Philosophers throughout history have noted the value of disagreement, and the giving and asking for reasons that disagreement prompts, to the advance of culture.

## THE COMMENTARIES

There are six commentaries, an essay and an exhibition review to follow. The commentaries adopt a range of approaches. We see the convergence of the three classic approaches to aesthetics in Paul Guyer's commentary on Paul Cezanne's "Banks of the Marne" (circa 1888): artistic intentionalism, phenomenology and formalism. Guyer effectively challenges the assumption that these three approaches are mutually exclusive. His response to Cezanne can be seen to originate in his expertise on the history of philosophy. Cynthia Freeland adapts these aspects in her response to Clarice Beckett's painting "Evening, St. Kilda Road" (circa 1930) to focus on feelings or moods. She identifies the feelings or moods in her experience of the work but questions whose feelings and moods they are: the artist's, her own, or a property of the work. Freeland's concerns emanate from her cognitive theory of art, a position shared

with those philosophers who draw upon cognitive science to understand both the content and reception of art. While both Guyer and Freeland experience their chosen paintings in terms of philosophical theories of art, David Macarthur shifts gear to philosophise not *about* art but *with* art.

Macarthur perceives the Thomas Demand photographic work entitled “Modell/Model” (2000) as a critical analysis of “seeing-is-believing”. He places Demand in the tradition of Socrates, showing us how Demand brings us to see that perception can be misleading. Robert Sinnerbrink enters his critique from another direction. Through a consideration of Weiwei’s “Forever” (2003) he considers whether there can be a productive worthwhile relation between philosophy and art. He might be seen to consider whether philosophy’s distrust of art, because of its perceived proximity to rhetoric, is shown to be misplaced by the extent to which Weiwei’s practice inspires us to engage cultural and political contexts in order to understand his work.

Plato once railed against giving the artist the authority to lead us. This is because Plato argued in *The Republic* that artists influence our attitudes through rhetoric. However, contemporary art draws to our attention the degree to which we need to be party to the meaning of the work: we construct the meaning or ascribe it in reception. And this Sinnerbrink demonstrates in his commentary.

Michael Newall and Mohan Matthen in their commentaries exchange views on the nature of pictorial realism. Newall describes how he experiences the objects in a painting by Tom Roberts “Holiday Sketch at Coogee” (1888) as the objects they depict. Matthen analyses how perception of Roberts’ painting involves unconsciously learnt visual cues in which selection and prioritization play a part. Newall’s commentary emanates from a long involvement in philosophical debates regarding how pictures represent, while expertise on philosophy of perception characterises Matthen’s commentary.

The commentaries reveal the concerns not of individuals but of the communities whose traditions of reasoned debate and analysis provide the means by which these philosophers experience the works.

This brings us to Joseph Kassman-Todd's philosophical essay which uncovers the philosophical assumptions about art criticism which underpin this issue. I argued earlier that art criticism is overtaken by various current practices but Kassman-Todd's conception of art criticism incorporates many of those practices. He shows that genuine attempts to engage with an artwork will always involve an objective basis but this basis might just be the community which conditions one's response to a work.

Finally this part of the Issue is rounded off by an exhibition review by Ian McLean. McLean discusses a permanent exhibition at the AGNSW, "Pukumani Grave Posts" (circa 1958) created by a group of Indigenous artists lead by Laurie Nelson Mungatopi. This is an installation of seventeen "funerary" poles. McLean critiques the category mistake demonstrated by exhibiting this work as part of the narrative of Western art. This challenge nicely demonstrates a core theme of this issue, and one which in effect we have argued dissolves the ancient quarrel. This is the natural impulse to find reasons to judge one meaning-ascription more apt than another; and in turn, the possibility of distinguishing between the kind of experiences had (Hein 2011: 183). Without this impulse, there would be no category mistake and nothing to prevent art from dissolving into mere rhetoric.

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#### BIOGRAPHY



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## NOTES

1. Ben Davis (2018) argues that the audience for art criticism is small because it is seen as a recommendation to attend an exhibition so only of local interest. The dominance of global media has overtaken professional art criticism and replaced it, according to Davis, with art celebrity or institutional scandal. See also Elkins (2003, 56-77) on the demise of professional art criticism.
2. For a discussion of Rorty on literary criticism, a brief overview is provided by Ned Curthoys (2014).
3. On Kant’s distinction between poetry and rhetoric see: AK 5: 327, 328 fn, § 53. “AK” refers to the Akademie Edition (the Prussian Academy edition) of Kant’s complete works. AK 5 refers to volume 5 which includes Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.
4. This is the way imagining in fiction is understood in Amy Kind (2016), 158. See also Amy Kind and Peter Kung (2016): 1, 13, 15-16, 23. They argue that imagination is either treated as instructive or alternatively transcendental (flying free from reality). In treating imagination as engaged by fiction as the latter, they would rule out the possibility of acquiring insight from art. And for reasons to reject this view, see McMahon 2018.
5. The eighteenth century British philosopher David Hume argues that we ought not to engage with values and moral principles that are not our own in art or fiction. See his essay “On the Standard of Taste” (1987: 243-49). Also see Moran (1994, 85) for a more contemporary argument for why values, humor and surprise in art and fiction must closely map what we value and find humorous and surprising in the actual world in order to avoid arousing imaginative resistance.
6. Gendler draws upon research in cognitive science to explain the interface between imagining, concepts and action.
7. This is explained in terms of dispositions we acquire through imagining in Susanna Schellenberg 2013.
8. This move takes us away from the idea of the art-gallery-museum as canon-maker. It is now more a space for meaning-making, the opportunity for which is put in the hands of its various communities. For an argument which I suggest this move refutes see Hilde Hein (1993).

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