

CAN AESTHETIC THEORIES OF ART BE RESCUED FROM THE PROBLEM OF AVANT-GARDE AND OTHER NON-PERCEPTUAL ARTWORKS?

– AN EXPLORATION OF NON-PERCEPTUAL AESTHETIC
PROPERTIES.

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Proponents of the aesthetic theory of art advocate that the aesthetic domain encompasses all artworks. However, there is a belief that although *much* art falls under the aesthetic, there are some artworks that do not. Avant-garde artworks are offered as counterexamples to the aesthetic theory as they are artworks that reject the very idea of the aesthetic. This paper explains the idea of non-perceptual aesthetic properties and explores whether it can incorporate avant-garde artworks into the domain of the aesthetic.

James Shelley, in his 2003 paper ‘The Problem of Non-Perceptual Art’, describes the problem as the inconsistency of the following three propositions: artworks necessarily have aesthetic properties that are relevant to their appreciation as artworks (proposition R); aesthetic properties necessarily depend, at least in part, on properties perceived by means of the five senses (proposition S); and there exist artworks that need not be perceived by means of the five senses to be appreciated as artworks (proposition X).¹

The aesthetic theory of art attempts to answer the question ‘what makes something a work of art?’ by supplying a general theory based upon aesthetic properties, which are properties that depend on properties perceived by the senses (propositions (R) and (S)).

¹ Shelley (2003), p.363.

Avant-garde works cause problems for aesthetic descriptions of artworks because properties other than those received by the five senses lead people to consider them art (proposition X).

It is important to note that an interest in the way something looks is not necessarily an aesthetic interest. For example, to look at an artwork to see whether it is a painting or a collage is to take a non-aesthetic interest in it. It is not this sort of interest we are concerned with when discussing properties relevant to the appreciation of objects as *artworks*. Aesthetic theories of art focus upon artworks necessarily having aesthetic properties that are relevant to their appreciation as artworks.

One of the earliest examples of the avant-garde, or non-perceptual art, is Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*: an existing urinal placed in a gallery in 1917. Among the most philosophically interesting things about this work are the facts that: (a) many people consider *Fountain* a work of art; (b) it was intended to make a statement rather than be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities; (c) the fact that it is specifically a urinal has no impact upon the work (it could be any object that achieves the same effect); (d) a description of the work is sufficient to appreciate it as an artwork; and (e) there exist many identical urinals that are not considered to be artworks.

Several attempts have been made to confront the problem of avant-garde artworks and rescue aesthetic theories of art. An obvious reaction is to deny that works such as *Fountain* are in fact art. This serves to shrink the domain of art to that of the aesthetic. This is inadequate as it avoids the issue and the need to explain why many people call avant-garde works 'art'. James Shelley describes this strategy as the first version of 'the first solution' to the problem of non-perceptual art. Using the aforementioned propositions, proponents of the first solution accept (R) and (S) but simply deny (X).

The second version of Shelley's description of the first solution denies (X) but on different grounds: avant-garde artworks *are* aesthetic because they have perceptible aesthetic properties such as pleasing curves and shiny surfaces. Advocates of avant-garde works as art believe that such an approach misses the point: Duchamp's intention was to create a conceptual statement about art, not an aesthetically interesting or pleasing object. This defence of proposition (X) is challenged by avant-garde artworks that are less easily appreciated as artworks in virtue of their perceptual aesthetic properties. Shelley uses Timothy Binkley's comments regarding Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q* (a defaced copy of the *Mona Lisa* with the letters *L.H.O.O.Q* at the bottom) to illustrate the point:

“Excursions into the beauty with which the moustache was drawn or the delicacy with which the goatee was made to fit the contours of the face are fatuous attempts to say something meaningful about the work of art. If we do look at the piece, what is important to notice is *that* there is a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*, *that* a moustache had been added, etc. It hardly matters exactly *how* this was done, how it looks”.²

The current orthodox aesthetic theory of art is more sophisticated than either version of the first solution. Shelley labels this theory ‘the second solution’ and describes it as accepting propositions (S) (aesthetic properties depend on properties perceived by the five senses) and (X) (there are some artworks that can be appreciated as such without being perceived by the five senses) but rejecting proposition (R) (artworks necessarily have aesthetic properties that are relevant to their appreciation as artworks).

The second solution accepts that literature and works such as *L.H.O.O.Q* and *Fountain* are artworks and is compatible with Duchamp’s view that to look at the aesthetic qualities of his works misses the point. However, it is not a work’s aesthetic properties that defines it as art. This raises the important question as to what *does* make them art. Shelley suggests that the appreciation of non-perceptual art could depend on there being some sort of non-aesthetic properties that play a corresponding role to that played by aesthetic properties in the appreciation of aesthetic art. Or, alternatively, the appreciation of non-aesthetic art could depend on nothing corresponding to the perception of aesthetic properties in the appreciation of aesthetic art. He argues that:

“if the appreciation of non-aesthetic art should turn out to be radically unlike the appreciation of aesthetic art, the first-solution advocate would have a new reason for asserting the discontinuity of allegedly non-aesthetic art with aesthetic art, and hence for rejecting the [second-solution advocate’s] claim to the status of art”.³

I think a further consequence of claiming that the appreciation of non-aesthetic art is very unlike the appreciation of aesthetic art is that it would strengthen arguments for aesthetic theories’ rival theories of art. This is because it leads us to think that not all art can be appreciated aesthetically, so we must seek an alternative general theory.

² Binkley in Shelley (2003), p.369. Emphasis in original.

³ Shelley (2003), p.369.

Aesthetic theories of art must thus avoid making such a claim.

Shelley also argues that to say that the appreciation of non-aesthetic, or avant-garde, artworks depends on properties playing a role matching that played by aesthetic properties in appreciating aesthetic art leads to the problem of how these properties manage to play such a role without being aesthetic properties. He states that second-solution advocates

“tend to attribute non-perceptual artworks properties that appear to stand to those works as standard aesthetic properties stand to perceptual works. Danto, for example, attributes daring, impudence, irreverence, wit, and cleverness to *Fountain*”.⁴

Second-solution defenders will agree that there are many similarities between non-perceptual properties, such as wit and daring, and perceptual aesthetic properties. However, their point is that aesthetic properties are essentially perceptual, properties such as wit and daring are not perceptual (so they cannot be aesthetic), avant-garde works are appreciated as art because of these non-perceptual properties; therefore it is not the case that artworks necessarily have aesthetic properties that are relevant to their appreciation as artworks.

This is a valid rejection of proposition (R) and one with which Shelley agrees to *in part*. However, he states,

“my disagreement with the second-solution advocate concerns only what we mean, or perhaps ought to mean, when we say that aesthetic properties are essentially perceptual”.⁵

The issue here is whether aesthetic properties being perceptual means that they can be directly perceived (with or without the five senses) or whether they are perceived via properties that are perceived (e.g. the way something looks). Shelley states

“The second-solution advocate is obviously committed to the latter, which is simply a restatement of (S) [that aesthetic properties necessarily depend, at least in part, on properties perceived by means of the five senses]”.⁶

⁴ Shelley (2003), p.370.

⁵ Shelley (2003), p.371.

⁶ Shelley (2003), p.371.

Shelley reacts against (S) and proposes ‘the third solution’ as a way to incorporate avant-garde artworks into the aesthetic theory of art. The third solution invokes the idea of non-perceptual aesthetic properties and takes the following form: it accepts (R) and (X) but denies (S).⁷ Shelley’s main reason for denying (S) is that aesthetic properties *strike us*. Shelley quotes Frank Sibley to help explain this notion:

“...People have to see the grace and unity of a work...feel the power of a novel, its mood, or its uncertainty of tone. They may be struck by these qualities at once, or they may come to perceive them only after repeated viewings, hearings, or readings, and with the help of critics...the crucial thing is to see, hear, or feel”.⁸

This does not reduce to the idea that aesthetic properties are perceived via properties that are perceived (i.e. the idea of perception that Shelley has rejected) because feeling the power of a novel or seeing that *Fountain* is witty does not come from the sight of the words or the gleaming curves of the urinal. Rather, these non-perceptual aesthetic properties *strike us* and are thus perceived *directly*, not through the five senses.

The third solution allows us to say that daring and wit are just as aesthetic as grace and elegance because these properties strike us, they are felt. So *Fountain*, *L.H.O.O.Q* and literature *are* artworks. The domain of the aesthetic has been stretched to encompass all art, even the avant-garde and the similar troubling case of literature. Shelley’s third solution also explains the philosophically interesting points I raised in my initial discussion of Duchamp’s *Fountain*. I shall now take each point in turn.

In light of the third solution, that *Fountain* was intended to make a statement rather than be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities no longer seems opposed to our notion of what an artwork is. This is because we can concede that conceptual artworks can be understood as embodying ideas and that such artworks can be appreciated for their non-perceptual aesthetic qualities, e.g. their wit, without alluding to their perceptual aesthetic qualities, e.g. curves.

It is also no longer concerning that *Fountain* being specifically a urinal has no impact upon the work. This is because when we appreciate *Fountain* as an artwork we do not appreciate it because it is an aesthetically pleasing object. We notice that it is an

⁷ Shelley (2003), p.363.

⁸ Sibley as quoted in Shelley (2003), p.372.

object not usually exhibited in an art gallery (which leads us to be struck by its wit and daring); it could be any object that produces the same non-perceptual aesthetic properties.

It is true that a description of an avant-garde work is sufficient to appreciate it as an artwork. According to the third solution, we are struck by the daring and wit of *Fountain* when we read about it not because we *see* the urinal but because it *is* a urinal (or an object that has the same effect). We can be struck by the non-perceptual aesthetic properties because they do not depend upon us using our five senses to infer their presence, to quote Noël Carroll, “we do not have to hear [or see] the work to be moved thusly; nevertheless, in being so moved the connection with feeling marks the property as aesthetic”.⁹

There exist many urinals identical to *Fountain* that are not considered to be art. This is not a problem for the third solution because it can explain *Fountain*'s special status in terms of the non-perceptual aesthetic properties that *Fountain* possesses but other urinals do not. The point above that *Fountain* could be any object backs this explanation.

Shelley's third solution justifies many of our intuitions regarding avant-garde artworks. However, I am concerned that it may lead to confusion about what *constitutes* an artwork. Part of the daring and wit of *Fountain* is derived from the outrage of many art-lovers who may not have perceived the work's wit or daring. It might be thought that Shelley's solution would lead us to extend the work to these comments. However, I believe Shelley would say that such art-lovers had failed to properly appreciate the artwork and that what makes Duchamp's works daring and witty is what they are and where they are. A response might be that the work must extend to its context. Would it be fair to say that the artwork *Fountain* is composed of a urinal *and* a gallery or the established ideas of the art world? It does not appear that the third solution draws clear lines for where avant-garde artworks stop and reality/regular objects/spaces begin.

Noël Carroll voices the most damaging criticisms of Shelley's proposal. He draws attention to the fact that there are further artworks whose status as artworks cannot be explained by the third solution. So Shelley's conclusion, that *all* art has now been explained, is too hasty. Shelley broadened the domain of the aesthetic to encompass more artworks but if there still exist artworks that fall outside of the aesthetic domain,

⁹ Carroll (2004), p.419.

these too must be explained by a good general theory of art.

Carroll states that if artworks necessarily have aesthetic properties (perceived or not) and there exist artworks that do not strike us, i.e. “that leave us indifferent when it comes to feeling”¹⁰, then Shelley has not rescued the aesthetic theory. Carroll states that artworks that leave us unmoved

“are what we call *bad* art; but it is important to remember that bad art is still *art*...the aesthetic approach still seems ill-suited for dealing with bad art”.¹¹

Carroll suggests rewriting the definition of art so that “something is an artwork only if it is intended to focus attention upon its [perceptual or non-perceptual] aesthetic properties”.¹² So, bad artworks can be art because they aim to draw attention to their aesthetic properties but fail to provide them. However, as Carroll notes, this creates further difficulties: there exist artworks that are not intended to focus attention upon their aesthetic properties (whether perceived or not). He presents tribal masks as an example because they were intended to scare enemies, not draw attention to their aesthetic properties.¹³

Carroll states his conclusion as, although he agrees with Shelley that conceptual art

“may possess aesthetic properties and support aesthetic experience, appropriately understood, I do not believe that this significant finding lends credence to the persuasion that art is essentially or necessarily aesthetic. For one will still have to show that all artworks are designed with the primary intention of focusing attention upon their aesthetic properties. And this seems to me, for historical and anthropological reasons, to remain implausible”.¹⁴

If this conclusion cannot be successfully challenged, the aesthetic theory of art will be in jeopardy. I believe it is worth exploring ways in which we might rescue Shelley’s third solution, and therefore the aesthetic theory of art.

A simple way to side-step Carroll’s objection would be to deny that artworks that do not intend to focus attention on their aesthetic properties are art. However, as I

¹⁰ Carroll (2004), p.421.

¹¹ Carroll (2004), p.421. Italics in original.

¹² Carroll (2004), p.421.

¹³ Carroll (2004), p.421.

¹⁴ Carroll (2004), p.422.

explained earlier in this essay, this is defeatist.

Another easy way to challenge Carroll's conclusion might be to state that anything placed in a gallery is an artwork. However, this would not satisfy Shelley's own idea of the aesthetic. Such a suggestion moves away from the aesthetic theory firmly into the realm of its main rival - the institutional theory.

Shelley could try to challenge Carroll's premise that there are artworks that are not intended to provoke consideration of their aesthetic properties. This is not an easy task and is certainly no quick fix as all that is needed to challenge Shelley's solution is the existence of *one* counterexample. Shelley could begin by trying to explain the art status of Carroll's example - tribal masks.

Tribal masks were made with the intention of scaring enemies and are now considered to be art, so Carroll argues. Given this, Shelley has several lines of attack: (a) tribal masks are not considered art, (b) tribal masks were not specifically intended to scare enemies, and (c) intending to scare enemies involves focusing attention upon the work's aesthetic properties. I think (a) is obviously false and that (b) would deny art-historical evidence. It appears that (c) is Shelley's best strategy.

If a mask is intended to scare, could we argue that 'scariness' is a non-perceptual aesthetic property in the same way that wit or daring are? If so, then the tribal masks are intended to focus attention upon their aesthetic properties and are therefore safely now considered art, according to the third solution, despite whether art was a concept employed or considered when the masks were made.

It could be said that scariness strikes us in the requisite manner. But is this just fear rather than a property the artefact has? I think the fear is a consequence of the scariness in the way that amusement may result from the wit of *Fountain*. To re-quote Carroll's description of Shelley's solution: "...in being so moved the connection with feeling marks the property as aesthetic"¹⁵, this appears to give further justification for calling scariness a non-perceptual aesthetic property because scariness moves us.

However, it is not so clear that scariness is an aesthetic property as it can be the case that artworks are scary without scary being an aesthetic property. But Shelley has already argued that if there are properties playing the role corresponding to the one played by aesthetic properties, we have little reason to deny that they are aesthetic properties. It seems that scariness does play the role played by aesthetic qualities so it is

¹⁵ Carroll (2004), p.419.

difficult to deny its non-perceptual aesthetic property status without denying wit and daring that status. However, it seems more intuitive to call daring and wit non-perceptual aesthetic properties than it is to call scariness an aesthetic property.

Herein lies the crux of this problem: where do we draw the line, if there is one, between properties that just cause feeling and genuine aesthetic properties? Shelley's third solution needs to be strengthened by the inclusion of an explanation of whatever underpins the intuition that there is a difference between scariness and wit.

Tribal masks are not avant-garde artworks so it might be said that Shelley's third solution has accounted for avant-garde works thus removing the majority of counterexamples to the aesthetic theory of art. However, the nature of avant-garde art means that since the era of Duchamp's readymade artworks, the boundaries have been pushed further, to the point where some new avant-garde artworks appear to fall outside Shelley's aesthetic theory of art. A contemporary, and controversial, example is Carsten Holler's *Test Site* presently being exhibited at the Tate Modern Gallery, London (April 2007).

Test Site is five five-story-high glass and steel slides that the public can ride. The artist describes it as "a device for experiencing an emotional state that is somewhere between delight and madness"¹⁶, but is it art? In 2006 *The Scotsman* newspaper declared: "it's a bloody helter-skelter...If I put a hook-a-duck stall in Tate Modern would that be 'art' too?"¹⁷

Shelley might argue that *The Scotsman* correspondent missed the point. Other than *Test Site*'s obvious perceptible aesthetic properties, the work strikes us as amusing, exciting and technically impressive. Being technically impressive certainly does *not* qualify *Test Site* as an artwork (artworks can be appreciated for things other than what makes them art) but amusement and excitement seem candidates for being non-perceptual aesthetic properties. However, at this point we fall foul of the same difficulty the third solution had with the tribal masks: is there enough intuitive appeal to call amusement and excitement non-perceptual aesthetic properties?

A further worry concerning excitement as a non-perceptual aesthetic property is that it seems dependent upon the five senses. *Test Site* is only exciting for those experiencing sliding down the slides. If excitement is a property of the work in this way

¹⁶ Holler in *The Scotsman* 2006.

¹⁷ *The Scotsman* 2006.

it seems dependent on someone presently experiencing the slide. Does this mean that *Test Site* is only an artwork when someone is using the slides (i.e. the artwork is extended to encompass the objects and the experience)? That seems counterintuitive.

Avant-garde artworks were the standard damaging objection to aesthetic theories of art. However, the idea that there are non-perceptual aesthetic properties provides a way to incorporate classic examples of avant-garde artworks in the domain of the aesthetic. Since the era of Duchamp's *Fountain*, avant-garde artworks have developed to the point of once again challenging the aesthetic theory of art. Counterexamples such as *Test Site* highlight that more work needs to be done to the non-perceptual aesthetic properties theory in order to preserve the aesthetic theory of art. Particular attention needs to be paid to the explanation of the intuition that some properties that strike us are *not* non-perceptual aesthetic properties. There needs to be criteria for determining what counts as a non-perceptual property and what does not. At present, Shelley's theory goes some way in expanding the domain of the aesthetic to incorporate avant-garde artworks. However, part of the art domain remains outside of that of the aesthetic. Artworks in this area remain counterexamples to the aesthetic theory of art.

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