

PRÉCIS OF BEYOND ART

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Monroe Beardsley, a founding figure of contemporary aesthetics, opened his magnum opus with the declaration that “there would be no problems of aesthetics... if no one ever talked about works of art.” This sentiment comes to life in the large and prominent literature disputing theories of art, which state what makes a given item a work of art, and which are driven by certain avant-garde puzzle cases, such as Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased De Kooning Drawing* and John Cage’s *4’33”*. How is the Rauschenberg art if a blank sheet of paper is not, and how is the Cage art when four and a half minutes of silence are not? Without a theory of art to answer these questions, it seems we could hardly begin to appreciate works like Rauschenberg’s and Cage’s. Thus theories of art have come to serve as the entry point to theories of appreciation in most contemporary aesthetics. *Beyond Art* seeks first to explain why it is a mistake to link theories of appreciation to theories of art, and then to defend an alternative approach to appreciation.

In its preoccupation with theories of art, contemporary aesthetics breaks from tradition. When the early moderns asked “what is art?” they wanted to know what makes some activities arts (e.g. painting, poetry, music etc.) and others not (e.g. history, science, design etc.). They sought a theory of the arts, which completes the schema “activity P is an art form if and only if...” By contrast, philosophers now seek a theory of art, which completes the schema “item x is a work of art if and only if...” Beardsley colorfully confesses how his interest in theories of art sprung from “the enormous and even ridiculous variety of objects, events, situations, texts, thoughts, performances, refrainings from any performance, and so on that have, in recent times, drawn the label ‘artwork’ from their authors, admirers, or patient endurers.” The puzzle cases leave us perplexed, unable to appreciate them, because we cannot see what makes them works of art. We have no trouble with activities like painting and music being arts; we have trouble appreciating some individual works like *Erased De Kooning Drawing* and *4’33”* as art.

In fact, however, it is more puzzling what makes *Erased De Kooning Drawing* a drawing and what makes *4’33”* music than what makes either of them art. If we knew what made the one a drawing and the other music, there would be no remaining puzzle about what made them art. So we do not need a theory of art to address the puzzle cases. Instead we may look to theories of the art forms, which complete the schema “item x is a work of activity P if and only if...” So unless a theory of art is needed for some purpose beyond addressing the puzzle cases, the following “buck-passing” theory of art is as informative as we need: “item x is a work of art if and only if x is a work in activity P and P is one of the arts.” This theory is designed in order to redirect attention from theories of art to theories of the art forms (and a theory of the arts).

Now is the right time to consider the benefits of passing the buck. Existing theories of art have reached an impasse, for they reflect and are unable to revise conflicting intuitions about the puzzle cases. Put broadly, aesthetic theories claim that what makes an item a work of art is partly its aesthetic character, whereas genetic theories claim that what makes an item a work is its origin in an appropriate context, so that in principle

anything may be a work of art so long as it has the right origins. There is of course a great deal to say about particular versions of these theories, but the two styles of theory contend with the puzzle cases in different ways. Aesthetic theories fit intuitions that the puzzle cases are not in fact works of art, and genetic theories are crafted specifically to explain why the puzzle cases are works of art despite the absence or irrelevance of any aesthetic character. Of course, intuitions can be revised one way or the other in light of theory, but the clash of intuitions is compounded by a disagreement about the criteria for theory choice. Unlike genetic theories, aesthetic theories explain value of art, and doubts about the art status of the puzzle cases often include doubts about their value. An impasse arises when theoretical preferences reflect not only differences in intuitions but also different criteria for theory choice, which are determined by the intuitions. The buck-passing theory clears the impasse by denying the relevance of the puzzle cases to what really needs to be explained.

Setting aside the puzzle cases, might one expect theories of art to analyze a theoretical concept of art as it figures in empirical studies of the arts? If art historians, literary critics, and ethnomusicologists study art and generate hypotheses about its change over time or its social function, then it seems that a theory of art should state what these hypothesis are about (while getting its content from these hypotheses). The buck-passing theory denies this: it predicts that the hypotheses of art historians concern visual art (not all art), as the hypotheses of ethnomusicologists concern music (not all art), for there are no empirical hypotheses about art in all its forms that are not also hypotheses about non-art. A crucial test case is anthropology, where inferences are commonly made from a group's having a concept of art to its having art or from its having art to its having a concept of art, given the methodological assumption that a group has art just in case it has a concept of art. The buck-passing theory does not support this assumption: it allows that while writing a song suffices to make art, it requires a concept of music, not a concept of art. A chapter of the book will discuss some typical inferences in social science and argue that they do not require a theoretical concept of art: attributing a concept of art is not required to understand the acts of making and appreciating paintings, songs, poems, and the like. If empirical art studies do not require a theory of art, the buck-passing theory will suffice.

Many philosophers have come to think that artworks have a specific kind of value, artistic value, which is distinct from aesthetic value. This thought springs from the puzzle cases – if aesthetic value wholly supervenes on perceptible features then *Erased De Kooning Drawing* has the same aesthetic value as any blank sheet of paper, but *Erased De Kooning Drawing* does not have the same value as a mere blank sheet of paper – so it has distinct value “as art.” The thought also arises in the debate about ethicism, the view that moral merits and demerits of a work are artistic merits and demerits. Sensible opponents of ethicism do not deny that some works of art have moral (de)merits; they deny that these (de)merits figure in a work's value “as art.” A chapter of the book argues that any good account of artistic value implies that there is no more to the value of a work “as art” than its value as a painting, song, poem, or work in some other art form – just as the buck-passing theory predicts. As a result, we need a theory of aesthetic value that does the work that some now assign to a theory of artistic value.

A framework for theories of appreciation consistent with the buck-passing theory should accommodate the strategies of the minority of philosophers that deprecate theories of art. Some have stressed that not all appreciation targets artworks and we need a theory that covers the *B-minor Mass* but also “Dancing in the Street,” baseball, Visconti pens, and the Grand Canyon. Others simply pass over theories of art in silence while getting on with developing general theories of appreciation or theories specific to individual arts. Research from both camps has produced notable successes, and it deserves to be anchored in a systematic framework, like the one developed in the second half of *Beyond Art*.

Since the buck-passing theory redirects attention to the individual arts, the first step is to say what it is for an activity to be an art. A complete theory of the arts is a serious challenge if it is historical accident that tea drinking is an art only in Japan, or gardening was a canonical European art form in eighteenth century but not the twentieth. However, if appreciation is not limited to the arts, then it will be enough to say what it is for any kind to be an “appreciative kind.” The classic view was proposed by Kendall Walton, who noted that any work belongs to indefinitely many kinds and the aesthetic features it appears to have depend on how we categorize it, so any work can seem to have many incompatible aesthetic features. Since we are sometimes wrong in attributing given aesthetic features to works, Walton proposed that the features a work has are those it seems to have relative to certain privileged kinds. *Beyond Art* adapts the main elements of Walton’s view, replacing his method of individuating appreciative kinds by their perceptible properties with a method of individuating them by media. Media are means for making, but they not merely means. For example, depiction is a mere means in an Ikea assembly diagram, but it becomes a medium when it is relevant to appreciation. (This theory of media does not imply the questionable doctrine that each art has a unique and specific material medium.)

For some time now, theories of aesthetic value have been treated as ancillary to aesthetic theories of art, and this meant that they were stretched so as to apply to all kinds of art – paintings, songs, buildings, and dances, alike. The puzzle cases took aesthetic theories of art to the breaking point – as Arthur Danto remarks, “Duchamp reinvented the concept of art, making aesthetics irrelevant.” The buck-passing theory of art suggests that it is time to try decoupling theories of aesthetic value from aesthetic theories of art, so that we can see what can be learned about aesthetic value if appreciation is an activity which aims to get at the aesthetic value of an item typed not as art but more specifically as a painting, melodrama, or the like. While *Beyond Art* does not present a full-blown theory of aesthetic value, it does attempt the more modest task of showing that all we need in order to understand appreciation is a theory stating what it is for a work to have aesthetic value as a member of some specific art form or genre.

The final chapter of the book revisits the avant-garde puzzle cases. After all, the buck-passing theory promises that the puzzle cases can be dealt with by theories of the appreciation of works in appreciative kinds. If the medium of drawing is depiction and the medium of music is tone, metre, and timbre, then it follows that *Erased De Kooning Drawing* is not a drawing and *4’33”* is not music. That explains why they are puzzling – we are at a loss when we try to appreciate the one as a drawing and the other as music. Appreciating them requires an understanding of their medium and a new art form (call it “conceptual art”). As it turns out, this result nicely fits recent philosophical reflection on

conceptual art, while drawing out the larger implications of that research for methodology in aesthetics.

Beyond Art seeks to display the advantages of a new approach to problems in aesthetics. However, it makes its methodological pitch through detailed contributions to a number of existing problems. It distinguishes different kinds of answers to the “what is art?” question and places those answers in historical and dialectical context; it diagnoses the stalemate over theories of art; it clarifies some confusion about when art figures as a theoretical concept in empirical art studies; it launches a critique of the now fashionable idea of artistic value; it offers new theories of media and appreciative kinds; it begins to work out a theory of aesthetic value not hampered by a conceptual connection with theories of art; and it applies all of this to the puzzles of avant-garde art that initially spurred Beardsley and many others working on “problems of aesthetics.”