

*In Situ*  
*In Situ*

I

In his short reflection, “The Best Picture”, Aldous Huxley (1925) notes a singular aspect of artistic engagement with the works of Piero della Francesca.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the major works of those in the pantheon of Western visual art are usually to be seen in the great galleries in Europe and North America, either in permanent collections or at retrospective exhibitions, nearly all of the major works of Piero can only be viewed *in situ*, in the same locations where they were painted - the area around Sansepolcro in the Tiber valley.

There is certainly a striking sense of ‘presence’ when one sees a work such as Piero’s *Resurrection* - described by Huxley as “the greatest picture in the world”! - *in situ*. But does this have any bearing on the proper appreciation of this or any other work? What difference can it make to the proper appreciation of a work of visual art that one views it *in situ*? Or, to reverse the question, what are the aesthetic implications, if any, of the fact that we almost never do view works of visual art *in situ*? Is the sense of ‘presence’ when one stands before Piero’s *Resurrection* in the Town Hall in Sansepolcro merely a kind of ‘superstitious’ thrill, like the thrill one might experience in looking at the original manuscript of a great novel or poem, for example? And does a failure to experience such a sense of ‘presence’ when viewing great art in major galleries simply testify to an inability to perceptually screen off distractions?

These questions can be framed with greater precision if we relate them to two more widely discussed issues. First, there are well-known arguments in support of the claim that the appreciation of an artwork requires that we locate an artistic vehicle in its *art-historical* ‘context’ - when it was created, by whom, with which materials, under what influences, given

what expectations, etc. The kinds of considerations offered in support of art-historical contextualism also, I shall argue, support according artistic relevance to viewing at least some visual artworks in what we may call their *situational* contexts. Second, a controversial topic in recent reflections on the performing arts is whether the ‘authenticity’, in some sense, of a performance is artistically relevant. As with the artistic relevance of viewing visual artworks *in situ*, what is at issue is whether certain expectations on the part of artists that their works will be presented for appreciation in a certain way have any legitimate bearing on the proper appreciation of those works.

## II

Consider Stephen Davies (1987) characterization of an ‘authentic’ performance of a musical work as an ‘ideal’ performance relative to (a) the piece created by the composer, as indicated in the score, and (b) the manner in which the composer expected or intended that it be performed, as usually reflected in performing conventions known both to the composer and the intended performers, where these intentions or expectations are reasonably taken to be determinative rather than mere recommendations on the composer’s part.

Why might authenticity, so construed, be thought to be artistically relevant? The most obvious answer is that authentic performances of a work *better enable us to appreciate the performed work* than inauthentic ones. An authentic performance, in Davies’s sense, presents a musical work in conformity with the intentions or expectations of the composer as to *which* notes should be played, upon which *instruments* these notes are to be played, and how those notes should be realized on those instruments by performers. This will bear on the proper appreciation of the work if two further conditions are satisfied: (1) some artistically relevant

qualities - some expressive or formal qualities, for example - manifest in authentic performances so construed differ from the artistically relevant properties that would be manifest in non-authentic performances; (2) in such cases, the qualities realized in authentic performances have a privileged status for the appreciation of the work.

Whether the first condition is met in a given case is an empirical matter, but the default assumption is that this will be the case. One way in which the second condition can be met is by taking the relation between musical works and the circumstances of their composition to be partly constitutive of those works. Art-historical contextualists, who take generative contexts to be so constitutive of works in general, will presumably see the second condition as satisfied. On the other hand, 'empiricists' who reject the arguments for art-historical contextualism might insist that what confers a privileged status on a particular way of performing a musical work is the aesthetic value realizable in performances of that kind: the composer's expectations or intentions have no privileged call, as such, on our appreciative interest in their works.

Consider now a parallel argument in defence of the claim that viewing at least some paintings *in situ* bears upon their proper appreciation:

### **The argument for situational contextualism [ASC]**

(P1) The qualities of a painting that are manifest in a viewing depend upon the physical context in which the viewing of a painting takes place.

This seems to be trivially true: for example, if the lights in a gallery are dimmed to the point

that only the bare outlines of a painting can be seen, very few of the colour-qualities of the painting will be visible;

(P2) In at least some cases, the artist expected or intended that her work would be viewed in a particular physical context, and this expectation guided the artist's generative activities in accordance with her further expectation or intention that certain qualities would thereby be manifest to suitably prepared receivers who viewed the work in that context;

(P3) In at least some of the cases cited in '2', the kinds of qualities in question bear upon the proper appreciation of the painting as the particular artwork that it is; so

(SC) The proper appreciation of at least some visual artworks requires that they be viewed in the (kind of) context intended or anticipated by the artist.

While ASC gives the intentions or expectations of the artist a determining role in the proper appreciation of her work, this is not a form of 'actual intentionalism' about artistic content *per se*, but a form of 'actual intentionalism' about the conditions under which such content is to be determined. It thereby carries no commitment to the idea that an artist's intention that his or her work has a particular artistic *content* can directly confer that content on the work. An artist or composer may intend or expect that a work manifest certain qualities when viewed or performed in a given manner, yet the work may fail to manifest such qualities to suitably prepared receivers who receive the work in the intended or expected manner.

Note also that it will be reasonable to ascribe artistic relevance to an *in situ* viewing of a painting on these grounds only when it is reasonable to ascribe to the artist the kind of

guiding intentions or expectations cited in P2. Where it is reasonable to think that an artist had only the most general idea of the kind of location in which the artistic vehicle of her work would be displayed for appreciation, it would be unreasonable to ascribe such guiding intentions or expectations, and therefore unreasonable to assume that some of the artistically relevant qualities of the painting are only appreciable if we view the work more or less in the physical context in which it was painted.

### III

The key premises in ASC are P2 and P3. To see how these premises might be defended, consider the literature on the artistic relevance of locating an artwork in its *art-historical* context. This literature takes as its target the sort of broadly ‘empiricist’ view of art appreciation canvassed earlier. Suppose we term those properties of an artwork that can be brought in support of a judgment on its artistic merits the ‘artistic properties’ of the work. Empiricists hold that a work’s artistic properties are restricted to properties that are ‘manifest’ to receivers in a direct experiential encounter with an instance of the work. Works, it is assumed, are given for appreciation in such experiential encounters and only properties directly available to receivers in such encounters are artistically relevant.

A widely voiced criticism of empiricism is that it greatly impoverishes our appreciation of artworks, because much of a work’s specific artistic content depends not just upon the manifest properties of the artistic vehicle but also, in many subtle ways, upon the artistic context in which that vehicle was produced with the aim of articulating a specific artistic content.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is claimed, we can properly appreciate a work only if we locate the manifest product - the artistic vehicle - in the context of its history of making. Critics of empiricism

have offered hypothetical examples where what are arguably distinct works with distinct artistic contents would be indistinguishable on empiricist grounds.<sup>3</sup> The intended lesson is that we cannot properly appreciate the artistic content articulated through a work's artistic vehicle without attending to the history of making of that vehicle - its place in the wider oeuvre of the artist, the artistic context in which the artist is working, and the broader tradition upon which she is drawing.

If we ask *how* knowledge of a work's art-historical context bears upon its proper appreciation, the most obvious answer is that it so bears because the relevant features of context determine that the work has particular contentful artistic properties in virtue of having particular manifest properties. We may term these features of context 'content-determining'.

Schematically:

[CD] if a work, with artistic vehicle  $V$ , has artistic content  $M$  because  $V$ , with manifest properties  $p1, p2$ , etc, was generated in art-historical context  $C$ , then the relevant art-historical properties of  $C$  are content-determining.

There is a second way in which knowledge of a work's art-historical context might bear upon its proper appreciation. Some philosophers have argued that appreciating an artwork requires that we grasp not only the work's artistic content and the manner in which that content is articulated through an artistic vehicle, but also the artist's achievement in articulating such a content in such a way. Denis Dutton, for example, maintains that "as performances, works of art represent the ways in which artists solve problems, overcome obstacles, make do with available materials" (1995, 24). But, to gauge the nature of the achievement represented by an artistic vehicle, we must know what the relevant 'problems', 'obstacles', and 'materials' were. We may call features of a work's art-historical context that play this kind of

determining role 'achievement determining'.

#### IV

Are there features of a work's 'situational context' that are, in an analogous sense, either content-determining or achievement-determining? If so, then the arguments for an art-historical contextualism can be marshalled in support of the claim that *in situ* viewings of a work can have artistic relevance. But what might these features of situational context be, and how might they relate to those features of art-historical context that play such content- and -achievement-determining roles? Three kinds of possibilities might be explored.

#### I

Note, first, that the schema CD to which the art-historical contextualist appeals in arguing for the artistic relevance of a feature of a work's art-historical context takes, as given, that the work's artistic vehicle has certain manifest properties *p1, p2, etc.* But, as P1 of ASC points out, which properties an artistic vehicle directly manifests will depend upon the conditions of viewing. Are there, then, cases where we have the kinds of guiding intentions or expectations on the part of the artist cited in P2 that bear upon the properties of an artistic vehicle that are directly manifest to receivers?<sup>4</sup>

Consider the fresco cycle *The Legend of the True Cross* which Piero painted in the church of San Francesco in Arezzo, It is reasonable to assume that Piero was guided in his arrangement of the frescoes and in his use of pigment by the presence of the large full-length window at the end of the chapel which strongly illuminates some of the surfaces while leaving others in

relative shadow. This is an extreme example of something characteristic of most paintings designed to hang in churches or chapels, where the exploitation of ambient light was seen as key to the painting's accessibility to viewers. In a gallery setting, however, the painting might look quite different. Colours that were deliberately brightened in view of the expected context may appear coarse or garish in gallery light.

Understanding the reasons *why* a painting looks the way it does - why these marks here, why this compositional element there? - is crucial to properly appreciating any visual artwork. An artistic manifold calls for an 'interrogative' exploration that seeks to make sense of the manifold in terms of reasons for its being ordered in the way that it is. But such understanding engages with the painting, as the historically situated entity that the art-historical contextualist insists it is, only if the painting looks the way it was meant to look.

Two more examples bear mentioning. First, in San Marco in Venice there are some mosaics on the floor that, if viewed under uniform electric light, will seem to be somewhat amateurish in construction. In particular, the mosaic surface is singularly uneven, with some elements projecting from the surface in an apparently functionless way. But, when the mosaic is viewed, as it generally is and as it was designed to be viewed, when illuminated by the candles located around it, the 'irregularities' create a distinctive and aesthetically very striking visual display. Second, Michael Baxandall (1988, 121-2) remarks that the much praised 'relievo' of Masaccio's frescoes in the Brancacci chapel are properly experienced only 'when the lighting is right' at a certain time in the morning:

'Highlights and shadows are apprehended as a form only when one has a firm idea of where the lighting comes from.'

## II

A second way in which situational context can be content-determining is by instantiating an analogue of CD itself. Certain aspects of situational context can partly determine the contentful properties ascribed to a work in virtue of those properties of an artistic manifold directly manifest to receivers who view the work *in situ*. In painting *The Legend of the True Cross*, Piero was constrained by the architectural properties of the chapel, which dictated that, while some frescoes could be horizontally rectangular, others required a more vertical format. Furthermore, the need to arrange the frescoes at different heights on the walls of the chapel called for careful use of foreshortening in the upper canvases. Seeing the frescoes in their intended architectural niche in the chapel at Arezzo provides us with necessary information if we are to correctly weight such features in our attempts to arrive at an interrogative understanding of the visual array. More saliently, in painting the *Resurrection*, Piero's brilliant employment of trompe l'oeil in the borders and base of the painting - which uncannily mimics the architectural relief of its setting - exploits the situational context to produce a particular kind of visual effect in the receiver.

To view such works in abstraction from these features of their situational contexts is to miss some of their contentful artistic qualities, and to obscure the rationale for certain details. We can to some extent compensate for ignorance of a work's situational context by providing an accompanying text setting out the relevant facts about the latter - see for example Michael Baxandall's fascinating discussion of the interpretive difficulties presented by Piero's *Baptism of Christ* in the National Gallery in London (1985, chapter 4). But this cannot provide the richness of information associated with viewing works like *The Resurrection* or the Arezzo cycle *in situ*.

Another point worth noting here is that, given the evidence for various kinds of cross-modular effects on individual perceptual modalities, it is reasonable to expect that non-visual features of a work's situational context may play a part in the visual experience that a visual artwork is expected to elicit. For example, the stillness, coolness, airiness, and ambient sound in the church of San Francesco in Arezzo might affect, and be intended to affect, the manner in which one reflectively attends to the fresco cycle, leading the receiver to attend to the painting in a certain way, and thus affecting how she looks at the painting and thus indirectly how the painting looks to her.

### III

Third, situational features of an artistic vehicle may also be achievement-determining. Generally, a work's achievement-determining properties are aspects of the history of making of its artistic vehicle that require 'retrieval' in Wollheim's sense - the reconstruction of the creative process. But grasping an artist's achievement in responding to certain challenges or solving certain problems may require an awareness of situational context if it is the latter that poses these challenges or raises these problems in the first place.

In painting *The Legend of the True Cross*, for example, Piero was constrained by the requirement that the paintings fit both with the architecture of the church and with the other works already in the side chapels. Part of his achievement lies in finding novel ways to satisfy those requirements. The painter's task here is like that of an architect designing a building to fill a pre-existing architectural and socio-cultural niche.<sup>5</sup>

Let me close with some observations on this defence of the ASC.

First, as noted earlier, the argument applies only where it is reasonable to think that the generation of an artistic vehicle was guided by the kinds of expectations identified in P2.

Second, there is a further restriction that parallels one noted by Stephen Davies in setting out the case for authentic performance. In replicating certain conditions of performance anticipated by the composer, Davies claims, we are interested in those conditions only insofar as they determine the acoustic manifold presented to the listener. While the composer may have expected a piece to be performed in a wood-panelled room, for example, authenticity requires only that a performance take place in a physical location that simulates those features of the original location upon which a sound event depends. However distinctive the acoustics of the space in which the composer expected the piece to be performed - for example, San Marco in Venice as the intended location for the performance of works by Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli - *in principle* we could replicate the relevant acoustic properties elsewhere.

The same considerations apply in the case of *in situ* viewings of visual artworks. While in practice, one can perhaps properly appreciate Piero's *Resurrection* or the Arezzo fresco cycle only if one views the works *in situ*, *in principle* the relevant features of situational context could be replicated elsewhere. This doesn't detract from the significance of our reflections, however. For our viewings of most Renaissance artworks occur in galleries that make no attempt to replicate relevant features of the situational context of the works.

Third, ASC, like the argument rehearsed for authentic performance, will cut no ice with a committed empiricist. The empiricist sees no aesthetically relevant reason for privileging, as

such, the composer's or the painter's expectations as to the context of reception of her works. What matters for the empiricist are the artistic values realizable in performances or viewings under given conditions of reception. The viewing that maximizes aesthetic value so conceived will only contingently replicate the conditions expected by the artist. Empiricism must be countered by more general contextualist arguments for the essentially historically situated nature of the artwork, before we can run ASC.

Fourth, while ASC has been presented as supplementing arguments for art-historical contextualism, there is a certain tension between the practical demands that each thesis places upon proper appreciation. Appreciating a work in light of its art-historical context is greatly facilitated by viewing it side-by-side with other works by the same artist, and of works by others who formed part of the art-historical milieu in which the artist was working. One's appreciation of Vermeer's paintings, for example, is enhanced by viewing them alongside generically comparable canvases by contemporaries such as de Hooch. Art-historical contextualists therefore welcome the opportunity to better place works in their art-historical contexts by viewing them in retrospective exhibitions. But such opportunities for locating works in their art-historical contexts normally require that the works are seen in a location quite distant and different from the one in which those works originated, and thus from their *situational* contexts.

Fifth, the argument of this paper can be interestingly contrasted with an argument by Susan Feagin (1995) that also stresses the importance of locating certain artworks in their situational contexts. Feagin is concerned with the appreciation of artworks whose primary intended function is not aesthetic is otherwise related to the non-artistic practices of the culture in which they originate. She is interested in the way in which such a work may be designed to

transfigure the space it is designed to occupy through its religious, ritual or other significance. If we remove the work from its situational context, then we emasculate it by depriving it of the power that it was intended to have. My concern, on the other hand, is with the way in which the space in which a work is expected to be received transfigures the appearance of the work, determining some of its manifest and relational qualities in virtue of which it has the artistic content that it does.

Whether appreciating an artwork with a primarily non-artistic function requires that we take account of how it was expected to perform that function is a moot point. Arguably, we need to know what its function was in order to understand how the artistic manifold is structured, and to appreciate how the artist has articulated the artistic content in virtue of which it is able to perform that function. But is it also relevant how *well* it performs that function? There is a striking analogy here with certain issues that arise in respect of artworks whose primary intended use was to serve as an eliciter of sexual arousal, such as some of Schiele's drawings. Is it relevant to the artistic appreciation of Schiele's drawing to take account of how they are designed to be arousing, for example?

Finally, our reflections on the artistic relevance of situational context for the appreciation of some Renaissance paintings bear upon the contemporary phenomenon of 'site-specific' art and artistic 'installations'. The latter are also to be viewed *in situ*, and draw in certain ways on their situational context. For example, Helen Chadwick's *Blood Hyphen* (1988) was created for the Woodbridge chapel in Clerkenwell, and its content draws in a number of ways upon the history of the chapel (which served as a medical mission after the second world war) and its unique architecture (a false ceiling installed in the 1970's which created the hidden upper chamber in which Chadwick staged her work).

Sherri Irvin's work (2005) on 'the artist's sanction' in respect of gallery presentation of installations, and Jason Gaeger's recent reflections (2009) on site-specific art, can, I think, be usefully brought into dialogue with the arguments of this paper. Gaeger's observations run in the opposite direction from mine - in the context of his discussion of contemporary site-specific works, he parenthetically remarks on parallels with traditional painting, and he doesn't address, as I have done in the paper, the conceptual foundations of situational contextualism in the epistemology of art. But his paper indicates that there is a developing awareness of the significance of these issues.<sup>6</sup>

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## Notes

1. "With the exception of the *Nativity* and *Baptism* at the National Gallery, all the really important works of Piero are at Arezzo, San Sepolcro and Urbino....Anybody, therefore, who wants to know Piero must go from London to Arezzo, San Sepolcro and Urbino. Now Arezzo is a boring sort of town...I deplore Arezzo; but to Arezzo, nevertheless, you must go to see Piero's most considerable works. From Arezzo you must make your way to San Sepolcro, where the inn is only just tolerable, and to which the means of communication are so bad that, unless you come in your own car, you are fairly compelled to stay there. And from San Sepolcro you must travel by 'bus for seven hours across the Apennines to Urbino. Here, it is true, you have not only two admirable Pieros (the *Flagellation* and an architectural scene), but the most exquisite palace in Italy and very nearly a good hotel. Even on the most wearily reluctant tourist Urbino imposes itself; there is no escaping it; it must be seen. But in the case of Arezzo and San Sepolcro there is no such moral compulsion. Few tourists, in consequence, take the trouble to visit them." (Huxley 1925, 187-8)

2. See, for example, Levinson 1980; Danto 1981, chapter 1; Currie 1989, chapter 2; and D. Davies 2004, chapters 2 and 3.

3. See, for example, Danto's gallery of indistinguishable red rectangles in chapter 1 of his 1981 and Levinson's musical doppelgangers in his 1980.

4. Note that this question, which the situational contextualist can pose to the art-historical contextualist, parallels one kind of challenge that the latter poses to the empiricist: what kind of background understandings are required if a receiver's looking at an artistic manifold is to yield and appreciation of the artwork realized through that manifold? See Wollheim 1980, for example.

5. It might be thought that the foregoing defence of ASC is too restrictive in that it takes account only of manifest aspects of a work's situational context, Why not also take account of such things as the cultural significance of the latter, the ways in which the art-object played a particular institutional or conventional role in that context and the uses associated with that role. But these aspects of a work's situational context are already included in the proposed account because they are aspects of the work's art-historical context. The argument for situational contextualism, as I have stressed, presupposes the anti-empiricist arguments for art-historical contextualism. To take proper account of the kinds of features of situational context noted above, we need only a description of these features - this is precisely what an art historian like Baxandall provides. The argument for situational contextualism relates to the physical location in which a work must be encountered if it is to be properly appreciated, not to the knowledge that we need to bring to such an encounter.

6. "Although the notion of site-specificity is a relatively recent phenomenon, the majority of artworks in the pre- and early modern period were not produced as siteless or 'nomadic' objects. Altar panels were commissioned for a specific church, portraits were made for the residence or offices of the sitter, statues were designed to fill a particular niche or atrium and thus to be seen from a particular point of view; and frescoes were physically inseparable from the building on which they were painted. Prior to the development of an independent art market most works were site-specific insofar as they were commissioned, designed, and produced for display at - and in some cases integration into - a pre-existing site....The destination of art was for the most part a specific location rather than the neutral space of the gallery, museum, or private collection....The relation between the work and its location is part of the work, not a neutral backdrop that can be changed at will." (Gaeger 2009, 55-6)