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Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar Jovanović

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Table of Contents

Lydia Goehr [Keynote Paper] <i>Painting in Waiting Prelude to a Critical Philosophy of History and Art</i>	1
Lucas Amoriello <i>(Non)Identity: Adorno and the Constitution of Art</i>	31
Claire Anscomb <i>Photography, Digital Technology, and Hybrid Art Forms</i>	43
Emanuele Arielli <i>Strategies of Irreproducibility</i>	60
Katerina Bantinaki, Fotini Vassiliou, Anna Antaloudaki, Alexandra Athanasiadou <i>Plato's Images: Addressing the Clash between Method and Critique</i>	77
Christoph Brunner & Ines Kleesattel <i>Aesthetics of the Earth. Reframing Relational Aesthetics Considering Critical Ecologies</i>	106
Matilde Carrasco Barranco <i>Laughing at Ugly People. On Humour as the Antitheses of Human Beauty</i>	127
Rona Cohen <i>The Body Aesthetic</i>	160
Pia Cordero <i>Phenomenology and Documentary Photography. Some Reflections on Husserl's Theory of Image</i>	174

Gianluigi Dallarda	<i>Kant and Hume on Aesthetic Normativity</i>	194
Aurélie Debaene	<i>Posing Skill: The Art Model as Creative Agent</i>	214
Caitlin Dolan	<i>Seeing Things in Pictures: Is a Depicted Object a Visible Thing?</i>	232
Lisa Giombini	<i>Perceiving Authenticity: Style Recognition in Aesthetic Appreciation</i>	249
Matthew E. Gladden	<i>Beyond Buildings: A Systems-Theoretical Phenomenological Aesthetics of “Impossible” Architectural Structures for Computer Games</i>	272
Moran Godess-Riccitelli	<i>From Natural Beauty to Moral Theology: Aesthetic Experience, Moral Ideal, and God in Immanuel Kant’s Third Critique</i>	319
Xiaoyan Hu	<i>The Moral Dimension of Qiyun Aesthetics and Some Kantian Resonances</i>	339
Jèssica Jaques Pi	<i>Idées esthétiques et théâtre engagé: Les quatre petites filles de Pablo Picasso</i>	375
Palle Leth	<i>When Juliet Was the Sun: Metaphor as Play</i>	399
Šárka Lojďová	<i>Between Dreams and Perception - Danto’s Revisited Definition of Art in the Light of Costello’s Criticism</i>	431
Sarah Loselani Kiernan	<i>The ‘End of Art’ and Art’s Modernity</i>	448
Marta Maliszewska	<i>The Images between Iconoclasm and Iconophilia – War against War by Ernst Friedrich</i>	483
Salvador Rubio Marco	<i>Imagination, Possibilities and Aspects in Literary Fiction</i>	506

Fabrice Métais	<i>Relational Aesthetics and Experience of Otherness</i>	522
Philip Mills	<i>The Force(s) of Poetry</i>	541
Yaiza Ágata Bocos Mirabella	<i>“How Food can be Art?” Eating as an Aesthetic Practice. A Research Proposal</i>	556
Zoltán Papp	<i>‘In General’ On the Epistemological Mission of Kant’s Doctrine of Taste</i>	575
Dan Eugen Ratiu	<i>Everyday Aesthetics and its Dissents: the Experiencing Self, Intersubjectivity, and Life-World</i>	622
Matthew Rowe	<i>The Use of Imaginary Artworks within Thought Experiments in the Philosophy of Art</i>	650
Ronald Shusterman	<i>To Be a Bat: Can Art Objectify the Subjective?...</i>	672
Sue Spaid	<i>To Be Performed: Recognizing Presentations of Visual Art as Goodmanean ‘Instances’</i>	700
Malgorzata A. Szyszkowska	<i>The Experience of Music: From Everyday Sounds to Aesthetic Enjoyment</i>	728
Polona Tratnik	<i>Biotechnological Art Performing with Living Microbiological Cultures</i>	748
Michael Young	<i>Appreciation and Evaluative Criticism: Making the Case for Television Aesthetics</i>	766
Jens Dam Ziska	<i>Artificial Creativity and Generative Adversarial Networks</i>	781

The Use of Imaginary Artworks within Thought Experiments in the Philosophy of Art

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ABSTRACT. The paper offers a view that if we regard the actual practice of art as manifested in his history and current extension as the object of analysis then thought experiments that use hypothetical, counterfactual, or otherwise non-actual situations and artworks can *only* be justified in very limited circumstances.

Two pillars of support, one methodological, the other epistemological, are given for this: Firstly, that art, as a practice makes *no* claim internally within its own methods that any particular putative art-making activity or particular artwork's existence should have experimental-type relevance beyond the actual result actually obtained within that practice. Indeed, the actual history of art suggests there is a positive reason *not* to assume that artworks function like this. Secondly, the range and valence of variables involved in real world art-making situations cannot be adequately reproduced in the descriptions of imaginary artworks. Thus, the paper argues imaginary artworks within thought experiments have to be described in such a way that they are not, and do not function, as artworks, whilst being required to have the presumed status of artworks.

The paper then considers whether a form of experimental aesthetics that constructs thought experiments *within the practice of art* by could retain the advantages of thought experiments. Three challenges to this suggestion are set out - each of which, it's argued, illustrate aspects of philosophy's

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relationship with art. The paper concludes on an open note as to whether this suggests a need for *any* philosophical view of art to have some element of normative criticality, or whether 'art' is the sort of concept for which philosophy's role can *only* be to provide a descriptive practice-based account.

1. Introduction

Les Expositions des Arts Incoherent were exhibitions in the 1880's in Paris set alongside the Salons Des Beaux-Arts, and Les Salons Refusé. The productions of this group do not feature in the standard histories of art for that period, nor were they valued as art by their contemporary audience: Not because they produced *bad* artworks – but because they did not produce *artworks* at all – Les Incoherents produced *satires* of artworks, to satirise the contemporary art world. Presented as they were, when they were, they were *not* artworks. However, the artefacts presented there *could*, at other times, and presented in a *different* way, have been artworks.

That's because within the Expositions Incoherent, however, some of the productions anticipated, both in terms of the material objects produced *and* the themes explored, some of the major innovative and iconoclastic artistic achievements within the visual arts from high modernism onwards. For example, Alphonse Allais produced monochrome canvases – of black, white and other colours; and wrote a score entirely consisting of rests for a silent musical piece; another contributor, Eugene Bataille produced a mock-

up of the Mona Lisa smoking a pipe; and contributions included sculptures from perishable materials, a mirror declared to be a universal self-portrait or works that invited the audience to contribute contents that the artist had neglected to include. Yet, the histories and theories of visual art do *not* state that some of the formal experiments of high modernism occurred first as farce in the late 19th Century, before revealing themselves as history when made as art rather than satire. Nor do they suggest that the innovators in artistic practise took their inspiration from, Allais and others of the Salon's Incoherent, or used their products materially or conceptually to make their works.²

Such examples are good prompters for philosophical questions about art. That these products were not regarded as artworks when they were made and are not treated as artworks now, despite there being later artworks that they clearly in some way physically and thematically prefigure, might prompt us to think that there are historical and institutional, or otherwise purely indexical factors in play about whether something is an artwork at any particular historical time or cultural situation. This suggests in turn that the generalisations that we make about art as a practice may be tied to a particular set of complex circumstances. They provide *real-world* actual examples that can be plugged into thought experiments to test questions about making, artefacts, history and contexts, each of which play pivotal

² See Welchman, (1997) pp.105-112 for a discussion of Les Incoherents and Allais with particular reference to the relationship between the works and their titles.

roles in philosophical thinking about art – so we can ask, for instance what makes Bataille's image of the Mona Lisa smoking a pipe *different* to Duchamp's image of the Mona Lisa sporting a moustache?³

But what would it mean if we were to regard the products of Les Incoherents as artworks? Philosophy of art can approach cases in which the status of an historical artefact as an artwork is in doubt, or accepted, or denied, either when made or now, in *two* fundamentally different ways: Firstly, of a disputed artefact it can suggest that these things *were* artworks at the time and *are* artworks now. This suggests that informed judgements made that it was or wasn't art, both at the time, and since, are *mistaken* and that there is some standard, external to these judgements, for arthood. Secondly, it can say that these things were *not* artworks and are *not* artworks because of the informed judgements made about them then and since. This suggests that the informed judgements *themselves* made at the time and since are the arbiters of what is, or is not, an artwork, at least for the time that those judgements hold good (they can of course change). This is a difference that can be described through the basis upon which mistakes can be made: One view says that *the practice of art* can be mistaken about the status of an object so that its attributions can be corrected, whereas for the

³ There are others of course: Examples in which objects that were *not* originally made as art become recognised as artworks, or things that *were* made to be artworks but which somehow failed to become artworks.

other view the *practice itself* would have to be deceived about an object's art status so that it *itself* would correct an attribution.

These two different approaches to questions, and the reasons provided in support of any conclusions, are manifestations of two different conceptions of the relationship between the philosophy of art and art. They may be called respectively the 'conceptual view' and 'the practice view'.⁴ Broadly, the 'conceptual view' seeks to analyse the concept of 'art' and draw conclusions for artistic practice from that, and the 'practice view' regards the actual practice of art as manifested in its history and current extension as the object of analysis. So, for Les Incoherents, for both concept and practice views they were potentially the *right* kind of objects made in the *wrong* kind of context, but for the concept view this is because of the *concept of 'art'* didn't allow them to be art at the time, and for the practice view it's because of the *historical record* doesn't show them as such. Similarly, other real-world examples, will be decided against these different evidential backgrounds. Most of the time the historical record and the concept will be in agreement - indeed the practice view seeks to form the concept of 'art' from the practice. Philosophy, however, tends to seize on moments or instances when they may not be, or when differences in views

⁴ Within the 'practice view', since status is established by practice, it's possible for something to gain or lose its artwork status according to the relationship an artefact has with current practice – that is, an artefact can be recognised as acquiring art status *from* a certain time *ad to* a certain time – and these times are potentially, at least different to its lifespan as a physical artefact (if indeed it is one at all).

about art status is marked by which of the concept and the historical record defers to the other.

I will now discuss some methodological constraints that follow from taking the practice view and its presumed deference towards the historical record as evidence in disputed or uncertain cases. The particular constraint moves on from the situations so far discussed, to involves instead, and exclusively, the use of *imaginary artworks* within thought experiments. This is, since they are not art, what we would be doing if we treated the things made by Les Incoherents as art within a thought experiment about art.

2. Thought Experiments in the Philosophy of Art

What are thought experiments for in the philosophy of art, and how are they used? They are commonly constructed to test a theory or idea through applying it to a new situation or set of circumstances. Indeed, this is the *point* - to discover the applicability of a theory beyond actuality and into possible situations. The thought experiments ask questions in the form of “What would happen if we applied position X to situation Y”, where position X is something that’s happened in the real world, and from which we have generalised out. The ‘situation y’ is often one that is not actual but is possible as a plausible new situation given the theoretical generalised extension of position X.

When we do this in the philosophy of art we will often construct descriptions of *imaginary* artworks – those that have not actually been made, but which, given an artwork that has actually been made, would, on the basis of a theory, seem to be unproblematically a further artwork.⁵ So, we take the actual art of the world, and use it to construct a description of a new artwork that could exist. These imaginary artworks have the role, within these thought experiments, of throwing light on our actual concept of art. Often they are used to make points about the kind of work that's needed to make an artwork, or the kind of things that could be artworks at any given time. The method of arguing is 'given this set of real world artworks, or way of making art, then this artwork, or circumstance too'. So, given a ready-made that's a bicycle wheel, it's unproblematic to posit a ready-made that's a tractor tyre, for instance – where the tractor tyre is, of course, the imaginary artwork.

This is then used to propose a general proposition which provides a test of the proposed theory: Based the actual real-world example of Duchamp's actions, we form a generalisation something along the lines of "readymades can be art", or "designation of an object as an artwork, is or

⁵ Three classic examples that function this are: Danto's (1980, 1-8) array of red squares; Levinson's (1980) that Strauss wrote a piece in 1897 with the same sound structure as Shoenberg's "Pierrot Lunaire"; Walton's (1970) suggesting a painting could be a "Guernica". Each of these different examples use that same basic methodology – faux artworks are posited to explain to extrapolate real artistic practice into the unknown.

can be, sufficient” or the such like⁶. This kind of thought experiment in the philosophy of art uses an historically particular actual occurrence to generate an ahistorical general proposition on the basis that the circumstances of this occurrence are replicable.⁷

The point I want to drive at now is that is that if we adhere to the view that the real artworks that *have* been made forms the evidential basis for our philosophical judgements about art, then there are problems for using thought experiments using *imaginary artworks* or counterfactual, or otherwise non-actual situations to produce and describe generalisations or theories.

3. Two Problems with Imaginary Artworks

I'll provide *two* pillars of support for this claim: The first is a *methodological* problem about the appropriateness of describing imaginary artworks in thought experiments as *artworks* given the role they need to play in those thought experiments: The second is a related *epistemological* problem about the results supposedly gained from thought experiments.

⁶ Of course, many of these will be more nuanced than these bold examples, but it is the *point* of generalisation, rather than the content of any generalisation that's my concern here.

⁷ This assertion can work in two ways: Firstly, that the particular circumstance has revealed something actually, that has always been true been never actualised (Danto(1964)) or that it the particular instance creates a general proposition from the moment of its actualisation (most historical/narrative/institutional theories).

They both point, in my view, to an underlying appropriation and simplification of art by philosophy.

The first problem is this: It's that art, when considered as a practice, provides *no* reason to think there should be *any* validity of *any* result beyond the *actual* result that has *actually* obtained within that practice – i.e. the artworks that *were* actually made in the precise historical contexts in which they were made. Moreover, the practice of art makes *no* claim from within its own methods that any actualised case of art production, need cover non-actualised cases or thereby provide a template, or set a precedent, or license a theory or generalisation about art making or artworks.⁸ However, philosophy, when constructing artworks to play a role in thought experiments, requires them to do just this, or at least to be able to function like this – it requires them to function *as if* they had *experimental* force or agency.

Indeed, the actual history of art suggest there is a positive reason *not* to assume that artworks do this or that art practice sets a precedent or template that could act as a theory or generalisations for non-actualised cases. For example, the purely theoretical possibilities supposedly opened-up by Readymades were *not* immediately seized upon by artists, nor were

⁸ Something similar may be said for politics, where incidents seem particularised and context performer and audience is all, for the effectiveness of any action. Perhaps by extension, this is true of the 'philosophy of' any cultural practice that may have its own existence, developmental history and practical and theoretical rules, separate to those of philosophy.

the non-art provocations of Les Expositions Incoherent - even though, each can be seen as enfranchisers, enablers, or anticipators of later artistic activity. Actual art history shows that art doesn't always take the theoretical route, it quite often, takes what might be called, the material route to its theoretical expansion. This might be puzzling for us philosophers, but it is not so for puzzling for art I'd suggest.

That's because whenever art is made by an agent this involves an historically situated performance of an articulation in a materially inflected language. Where, when this happens, philosophy sees a theoretical innovation, art and artists may not, or may not see *that* as important, or as relevant, to *why* and *how* a work is valuable as art, which may be for a whole host of other reasons, that completely pass philosophy by. As much as philosophy might regret it, artistic activity is *not* primarily in the business of investigating its theoretical conceptual boundaries through its productions. That's what we philosophers might extract from it, but it might, at best, be one component part of the occasional piece of artistic activity.

One consequence of this is that in the real world, individual artworks do not give clear results or have predictive power for future artistic activity, in a way that can be read off as a generalisation from one particular achievement and art as a practice is not one that seeks to use its particular achievements from which to extrapolate general positions. However, the use of artworks in thought experiments, *does* tacitly assume a *direct* route from artistic practice to the opening up of theoretical possibilities of that practice.

This is, in effect, philosophy extracting from the complex practice of art, what it needs for its own purposes and casting *that* as paramount. That's why we get some artworks being more philosophically interesting than others. They are those that seem most amenable to be regarded as experimental in nature. It is philosophy's needs which attribute to artworks an obligation to provide experimental results. However, artworks do not have an experimental structure as *artworks*. Their use within thought experiments requires this to be true of them. As such, their use within thought experiments requires them not to function or exist as *artworks*, but yet to give the thought experiments force and locus for art, to simultaneously have the *status* of artworks. These thought experiments in giving artworks this role, are then not imagining *artworks*, but imagining philosophical positions outside the practice of art, as if manifested in art.

More than this, in order to extrapolate the possibility of imaginary artworks from existing artworks we need to treat those actual artworks as giving something closely akin to experimental data, to treat them as if they, in combination with whole history of art before them, have predictive power for the next step in artistic activity. However, the ground that's opened up by an artwork is not the ground opened by a proposition, or a proof, or an experiment, it's like the ground opened up by the existence of a new person - just because I exist doesn't mean that 'things like me' can also exist, or that my parents could have made other things just like me – in fact they couldn't do that *because* I exist.

Secondly, the epistemological problem: Given a philosophical account which suggests that a particular set of complex circumstances of an artwork's manufacture (however cashed out) are necessary to an artwork's identity, then it's difficult to extract from *actual* examples, both the *extent* of the context required for the successful art-making activity, or the *weight* and *interplay* between different aspects of that context. Indeed, in extremis, if the historical moment of the practice's development is *also* an important factor of the circumstances, extending out to *any* qualitatively similar set of circumstances beyond that which actually obtained might not be possible. If it is part of the identity of *Trebouche* that it was made by Duchamp at that time, then if we change any of those variables in play for its presentation and acceptance as an artwork – author, piece, title, show, the Bourgeois Art Gallery, the audience etc. then it may not have been successful to present that artefact as an artwork. We don't know. The historical record of *Trebouche* being an artwork means it was sufficient for Duchamp to have done that then in those circumstances, for sure, but precisely why and how is unknown.

Indeed, if the historical moment of the practice's development is *also* an important factor of the circumstances, extending out to *any* qualitatively similar set of circumstances beyond that which actually obtained will be of dubious applicability. Just because 'this' real circumstance has been possible, does not mean that 'that' imaginary one is possible – 'that' imagined circumstance might require a whole host of other contributions from a range

of artworks and non-artworks, from both near and far history, that together with 'this' actually existing make the conditions right for 'that' to be attempted, for it occur to an artist that its worthwhile for 'that' to be attempted and then for it actually to be accepted, not only as successful attempt, but also as a worthwhile attempt. The problem is that the real-world context is so rich it can't be adequately described, let alone taken account of in any thought experiment that moves from the actual to the imagined.

That said, minor changes to any *one* variable involved, such as deciding to make a readymade on a Wednesday instead of on the Tuesday, seems on a pragmatic basis unlikely to change either the success of the art making activity or the identity of the particular artwork. It may be then that the imaginary artwork that is *Trebouche* being made one day later than it actually was but otherwise a the actual *Trebouche* was it was, is one that is more well founded, because it sticks much closer to actual reality. An imaginary artwork of that kind, based on a single modification of an actual artwork, would have little explanatory or argumentative force, and it would certainly not allow much generalisation - i.e. it would be legitimate to use that imaginary artwork to argue that some individual variables within an historical context of art making and artwork identity might not have to be fully determined, or that not all parts of a context were equally contributory to artwork identity, but not to suggest that wider changes (such as the authorial identity) could also be countenanced. However, the point here is that we have no warrant either to isolate some individual parts of the overall

context, or ignore the richness of the context that each art-making activity requires – both of which are required in forming the kind of imaginary artworks that can provide the experimental type data for thought experiments.⁹

Put simply, even if we do accept, against the first methodological objection, that artworks can set theoretical precedents, the actually existing artworks we've got to work with won't tell us *how* to expand into the non-actual – and we can't get an adequate description from anywhere else apart from those actual artworks. In art, neither the past nor the present is a reliable guide for the future.

This makes the 'possible' in the 'it is possible to make...' type generalisation that thought experiments seek to test *much more* problematic than it might first appear. Again, the construction of the imaginary artwork requires that we describe the imagined artwork in as far as it meets our philosophical purpose, but, if we are holding a position that their identity and existence conditions necessarily involves the precise context of its creation, then that description is far less than is actually demanded by the very philosophical theory itself subscribed to by the philosophical thought experimenter. Indeed, even for such philosophical positions, lurking behind the use of thought experiments using imaginary artworks may well be the shadow of the thought from philosophy's past that artworks are so because

⁹ I am grateful to conversations with James Hamilton for my thinking on this point.

of the kind of object they are, rather, than the kind of context in which they are enmeshed.

To sum up these two problems, it is first that artworks may be not the sort of things that are generalizable out from their particular instantiation, and that their being artworks makes no demand on them that must, or even might be, but that the construction of an imaginary artwork demands that real artworks can be treated as such. Secondly, that the real-world context of an artworks' production is too complex to be reproduced in thought experiments and/or is always radically under-described in terms of its identity and existence conditions as an artwork. Both problems point to the same underlying position – that imaginary artworks constructed in philosophical thought experiments cannot actually be artworks, as they are in the real-world.

4. Experimental Aesthetics or Philosophical Anthropology?

If the problem is that philosophy imagines things with the status of artworks, but which function as theoretical experiments, rather than as artworks on their own terms, then perhaps a solution is to actually make artworks? Could this replicate some of the intended clarificatory effects of thought experiments using imaginary artworks without the problems? Consider a form of experimental aesthetics that amounts to 'philosophical anthropology': Imagine a 'thought experiment tester' constructing

experiments within the *practice* of art by *making* artworks from those conceived within philosophical thought experiments, so instead of describing them in a paper, they perform them through their actions. They make the philosophically theoretical, artistically actual. Would this let them exist as artworks?

This proposal faces (at least) 3 challenges¹⁰ - each of which illustrate aspects of philosophy's relationship with art.

The first is whether the work of the philosophical anthropologist would get *accepted* as art by the practice of art. It would need deep deep cover I suspect, at least a deep as Kosuth or Art & Language and require it to be explicit that it was an *artistic* project. If the underlying philosophical nature of the project was discovered, it may lead to the works being rejected by art, as somewhat ersatz, and relegated to some secondary realm of things about art, but not art, like the satires of Les Incoherents, or indeed fakes or forgeries.

Then there are two worries about the effect – artistically and philosophically – of doing this. For art, if the philosophical anthropologist's works *do* get accepted as artworks, the effect of these philosophical experiments will have been imposed from outside that practice and done for philosophy's need, and not for art's internal logic, (which may be weak or strong or non-existent, but whichever, is not the same as philosophy's need).

¹⁰ There are more – what for instance does occasional failure look like and what does it mean for the philosophical project?

For *philosophy*, the effect of doing the practical version of a thought experiment within the practice will change that practice so that it is different from that which was to be initially tested by the experiment. We effectively set up a parallel version of art – 'art*', which by admitting the thought experiment situation as definitely relevant to its analysis, diverts that analysis away from art as a practice in this world, and into describing the practice of 'art*' – which now contains all the art in this world and the imagined artwork added as real by the experimental thought experiment. The version of the practice that includes the actualised thought experiment is no longer 'art' as it was, but now art, given our theoretical extension via our manifested thought experiment. In doing so they may license possibilities in 'art*' that would, like the Les Incoherent products, not be licensed by the actual practice of art in this world.

We have tested to see if art will accept our philosophical extension of it and if it does, the conclusions are retrospective, looking back to the practice as it was, not as it now is. So, the philosophy of art, by subsuming itself within the practice of art, will always through its experimenting render the results of that experiment obsolete, even though part of its philosophical project will have been to scope the future of art, through testing its present.

What this means is that we have, in effect, moved beyond making experimental thought experiments about art as a practice, to making experimental thought experiments about 'art' as a concept. The use of experimental philosophy to cover non-actual situations and artworks will

have become conceptual analysis, not practice analysis – they are about the concept of ‘art’ but not solely about how it is used and forged in practice. In order to defeat these worries the experimental philosophy would have to break free of the practice. But then we are back with philosophy once more, looking from the outside in, adjudicating, on the basis of possibilities, what can count as actual instances of the practice.

Thought experiments using imaginary artworks will inevitably be a tool for *philosophy*, rather than getting to a description of the possibility of art on art’s own terms. Using them relies on extracting only, and taking as paramount, the supposed *theoretical* possibilities arising from actual artistic practice - but does not recognise it as an historically and materially particularised activity. As such they are of definite philosophical value, but their use indicates moving beyond a purely practice-based approach to art. This is the root cause of the tensions so far highlighted – that thought experiments in philosophy do conceptual analysis, but this is alarming for any philosophical project that seeks in its view to respect art’s parvenu to decide what is and what is not, art and so their use within any practice analysis based on a practice view of art is more obscure.

This is why, if you are using actual art of the past as a substantial part of your enfranchising reason for why art of the present gets accepted as such, then using thought experiments containing imaginary artworks will very likely be illegitimate, as it augments the history of art, as it was, with theoretical extensions of it as you’d like it to be. It not only changes the

history of practice, it warps it so that it includes all actual art and this philosophical interloper inserted for philosophy's need but allowed no full artistic articulation - and without allowing for its consequent (and unknown) historical ripples for art. It's like imagining if the products *Les Exposition Incoherents* were artworks: That would change everything in the actual history of art the later experiments of modernism, if they happened at all, would be radically different if they were evaluated in an art history in which those experiments had initially been the subject of humour. Thus, there is at least a tension, if not outright contradiction, in having a philosophical theory that suggests that the actual history of art is the basis for the reason of the acceptance of new proposed artefacts etc. as art, and the use of thought experiments within that theory that imagine artworks that don't actually exist, but yet which have the appearance of being situated within real art historical time and contexts. Nor, if you take the practice view and accept that the actual practice of art is the evidential basis for judgments about whether something is art or not, can you test that theory using imaginary artworks within thought experiments. We don't have a sufficient warrant to invent artworks that were not in the history of art and insert them into the same history of art that we currently enjoy. Our current history of art is here now because of what it has been in the past, and because it is no different to how it has been in the past - change the history and you change the concept (or at least change the extension of the concept). One can't use imaginary art to support the causal and explanatory sufficiency of actual art.

Yet, this does offer those who commit to a practice view both a potential *freedom* from the results of such thought experiments, and a *constraint* on their legitimate construction. The freedom it gives is a potential immunity from attacks from thought experiments using non-actual situations. They become, potentially irrelevant as outside the scope of the theory or can be cast as illegitimately constructed. The answer is always open, that there is some reason why the non-actual situation would be defeated in the real-world practice.

However, the potential freedom becomes a *prison* when trying to argue positively *for* such positions philosophically. If we discount the relevance of imaginary artworks in our thought experiments, then *all* we are left with for our comparison set to test these theories of art is the manifestation of the practice in the *actual world* – the artworks (and non-art, like the productions of Les Incoherents) that *actually exist*. This may lead such positions to collapse into little more than descriptions of that one actualised world. The philosopher, is in effect, trapped within the history of art.

5. Conclusion: Nettle Grasping

Finally, to end on this, this suggests to me an open question as to whether we need to grasp some nettles: Firstly, to say there's an inevitability for any philosophical theory of art to have some element of normative criticality to

it, even if it takes the actual practice of art as the evidence basis for its judgements. This would let us carry on doing conceptual analysis sticking as close as we can to actual practice.

Alternatively, perhaps that given the sort of practice art is, there may be no *need* for a philosophical theory to range over the non-actual as well as the actual in order to be adequate from art's viewpoint. This would mean that philosophical theories of art do not *need* proofs and generalisations or future proofing, they simply *need* to be able to track *actual* practice. So, for art, as a concept that's given in practice, adequate theories only require one-world extensional equivalence and validity: That is - the manifestation of the practice in this actual world. This does of course require a prior commitment to the existence of artworks. Perhaps the empirical historical generalisations (such as "some contexts have produced readymades") are the best we can hope of getting from art. Perhaps, more mysteriously, and even more philosophically, 'art' is the sort of radically contextually sensitive concept for which philosophy's role can *only* be to provide a descriptive account of what is going on. Each nettle has its stings.

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