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Volume 7, 2015

Edited by Fabian Dorsch and Dan-Eugen Ratiu

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## **Proceedings of the European Society of Aesthetics**

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# ***Beyond Beauty: The Values of Art — Towards an Interdisciplinary Axiology***

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ABSTRACT. The modern Western tradition tends to equate art and aesthetic value. But such a conception is too narrow: aesthetic value does not have the monopoly of the many values involved in the creation, circulation and reception of art works. An interdisciplinary workshop on values, held in Paris in 2012, gathered philosophers, art historians, musicologists, sociologists, anthropologists, economists, jurists, and ended up in a collective book published in 2014. It allowed to display the repertoire of the most relevant values related to artistic experience, be they assigned to art works, artists or art lovers: besides beauty, we identified authenticity, autonomy, celebrity, expensiveness, morality, originality, pleasure, rarity, responsibility, significativity, spirituality, sustainability, truth, universality, virtuosity, and work. What is at stake here is not to demonstrate that such or such a value is or is not present in art works, artists or art lovers, but to observe the way various axiological expectancies are projected on the art world, according to artistic domains, cultural and historical contexts, as well as the social position of those who defend those values. A final focus on the value of celebrity provides a more detailed illustration of our proceedings: the meaning and relevance of the value of celebrity changes not only according to its ascription to artists (such as “stars”) or to art works (such as famous masterpieces), but also according to the concerned artistic domains, from visual arts and literature to cinema.

The modern Western tradition tends to equate art and aesthetic value. But such a conception is too narrow: first, because art does not have the monopoly of the aesthetical relationship to the world, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer clearly demonstrated; and second, symmetrically, because aesthetic value does not have the monopoly of the many values involved in the creation, circulation and reception of art works. By “values”, I mean the axiological principles according to which evaluations or attachments are implemented, be it by ordinary people or by scholars.

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## 1. The Workshop

An interdisciplinary workshop on the values of art was held in Paris in 2012. It gathered five philosophers, two historians, two art historians, two musicologists, one anthropologist, one economist, one sinologist, one jurist, and one sociologist (myself). The results of this collective workshop have been published in 2014 by the Presses universitaires de Rennes in a book edited by myself, Carole Talon-Hugon and Jean-Marie Schaeffer, under the title *Par-delà le beau et le laid: les valeurs de l'art* ("beyond beauty and ugliness: the values of art").

The idea was to display the repertoire of the most relevant values related to artistic experience, be they assigned to art works, to artists or to art lovers. Besides beauty, we identified 16 values which appear to be relevant in value judgements on art: *authenticity* (addressed by Belgian philosopher Thierry Le Nain), *autonomy* (addressed by French musicologist Esteban Buch), *celebrity* (addressed by myself, a French sociologist), *expensiveness* (addressed by French economist Muriel de Vriese), *morality* (addressed by French philosopher Carole Talon-Hugon, keynote speaker in the present conference), *originality* (addressed by French jurist Nadia Walravens-Madarescu), *pleasure* (addressed by French philosopher Jean-Marie Schaeffer), *rarity* (addressed by Swiss art historian Pascal Griener), *responsibility* (addressed by French art historian Eric Michaud), *significativity* (addressed by French philosopher Ioana Vultur), *spirituality* (addressed by French historian Pierre-Antoine Fabre), *sustainability* (addressed by French anthropologist Daniel Fabre), *truth* (addressed by French philosopher Sandra Laugier), *universality* (addressed by French sinologist Yo-laine Escande), *virtuosity* (addressed by French musicologist Bruno Moy-san), and *work* (addressed by French historian Etienne Anheim).

Our aim was to produce a descriptive analysis of the relationship of actors to the values they solicit in their evaluations, be it in ordinary experience or scholarly discourse. Our approach then was strictly neutral, free from any attempt to foster or dismiss one or another value. Besides this abstention from normativity, another specificity of our enterprise was that our object was not art, but the actors' relationship to art: in other words, what was at stake was not to demonstrate that such or such a value is or is not present in art works, artists or art lovers, but to observe the way vari-

ous axiological expectancies are projected on the art world, according to the artistic domains, the cultural and historical contexts, as well as the position of those who defend those values. We aimed, then, at evidencing the properties allowing a given value to be implemented in artistic judgment: be it the *objectal* properties of the art work itself, the *subjective* properties of the author of the judgment, or the *contextual* properties related to the spatial, temporal and cultural circumstances of a valuation.

In order to let this piece of collective work be available to non-French speakers, I would like today, first, to summarize a few main results ; and, second, to present one of those values – that is, celebrity – in order to provide a more detailed illustration of our proceedings.

## **2. Main Results**

Any observer of contemporary visual art knows that beauty has quite completely disappeared in the learned judgments on the works pertaining to contemporary art. Similarly, our workshop helped develop some general conclusions about the various values we identified.

We could observe how *authenticity* progressively gained a central position in the Western relationship to art works, thus replacing relics as the typical target of such a requirement ; how *originality* became both the keystone of the juridical status of art works and a stronger and stronger requirement when passing from classic to modern art and, all the more, to contemporary art; how *money* became a marginal if not undesirable criteria of valuation from the Romantic era, while dramatically expanding on the market ; how *morality* lost part of its relevance with modern art, before being re-implemented in front of contemporary art transgressions of moral norms ; how *pleasure* regularly demonstrates a strong cleavage between the learned and the lay approaches to art ; how *responsibility* became a strong requirement when avant-garde and political “engagement” appeared as a positive property of modern artists or art works ; how *significativity*, or meaning, tends to replace beauty in the valuation of contemporary visual art, placing hermeneutics at the very center of the artistic comments on art works; how *spirituality* did not disappear when passing from classic to modern art, but was transmuted onto a more mystical than properly religious register ; how *virtuosity* swings between approval of an exceptional

talent and dismissal of a too superficial relationship to music ; how *work* as a value is typical of the poorly educated people, who tend to apply values belonging to ordinary experience - etc.

### 3. The Value of Celebrity

As for the value of celebrity, its meaning and relevance change according to two main parameters: first, its ascription to artists (such as “stars”) or to art works (such as famous masterpieces); and second, the concerned artistic domains, from visual arts , music or literature to cinema.

Concerning *art works*, celebrity can result *from* art works, be they visual (paintings, sculptures, engravings, photographs) or literary (biographies), or it can be a property *of* the very art works, if we consider that some of them are genuine “stars”, such as Leonardo’s Mona Lisa, Beethoven’s 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony, the Eiffel tower, or Proust’s *A la Recherche du temps perdu*. But in our learned world, celebrity – or, worse, visibility – tends to generate a loss of value, since it is equated to popularity, that is, vulgarity: a reason why celebrity becomes more an anti-value than a value. Thus we can observe that a one and same principle of judgment can be either positive or negative: a value can become an anti-value, according to the context.

Concerning *artists*, we have to distinguish between the ones who *produce* or create artworks (writers, painters and sculptors, music composers) and the ones who *interpret* art works (actors, musicians, dancers). As for interpreters, their celebrity has been very much transformed by the modern technologies of reproduction of images, transforming their celebrity into *visibility*, with major consequences that I tried to evidence in my book *De la visibilité*. As for creators, their visibility is rather scarce, except for a few exceptional ones (such as Picasso); but even celebrity may be a motive of disdain or defiance, since in our learned world what is supposed to be worthy is not the person of the artist, but the very art work: hence, once more, a certain suspicion on celebrity.

This fragile and easily dismissable status of celebrity can be observed through the fact that this principle of valuation tends to be more present in private interactions than in public statements. On the contrary, “beauty” appears as a typically “public” artistic value, standing high in the probabilities to see it expressed in almost any kind of context, by almost any kind

of actor, and about almost any kind of art work. This is why, in order to understand the place of celebrity in the hierarchy of values, it appears necessary to distinguish between “public” values, more legitimate and thus more akin to a public expression, and “private” values, less legitimate and thus reduced to private contexts. The higher the artistic domain is in the artistic hierarchy, the lower celebrity is in the axiological hierarchy, condemning it to more cautious or inter-individual modes of expression.

This is why celebrity, although it is strongly bond to publicity, can be named a “private” value, which means a weak value, low in the hierarchy of values. Be it about the models of art works, about the art works themselves, or about their producers or interprets, celebrity is, as a fact, extremely present in the axiological status of art, but, as a value, rather disqualified, as it is all the more powerful that the artistic quality is presumed to be low.

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