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To Be Assessed. Peter Strawson on the Definition of Art

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Abstract. In his paper 'Aesthetic Appraisal and Works of Art', Peter Strawson outlines a definition of art that can be summarized as follows: an individual is a work of art if and only if its criterion of identity is the totality of features which are relevant to its aesthetic appraisal. Strawson's account has been, so far, largely overlooked in the debate about the definition of art. I will defend a version of Strawson's account by spelling out and trying to amend its basic components; namely, 1) the criterion of identity; 2) the merit-conferring features; and 3) the aesthetic appraisal. Finally, I will address some objections that can be raised to a Strawsonian account of art.

'This work of art is not to be assessed'. Here is a sentence which seems to contradict our basic intuitions about what works of art are. Even the most experimental works in conceptual art or the most useful works in architectural art, or the most exotic works in non-Western art seem to be, in virtue of their being works of art, objects of assessment. In his paper 'Aesthetic Appraisal and Works of Art',[1] Peter Strawson characterizes the relevant assessment as an aesthetic one: 'The concepts 'work of art' and 'aesthetic assessment' are logically coupled and move together, in the sense that it would be self-contradictory to speak of judging something as a work of art, but not from the aesthetic point of view'.[2]

According to Strawson the property of being the object of a possible aesthetic assessment is a necessary condition for something to be a work of art. Certainly, this condition is not sufficient to define what a work of

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[1] Peter Strawson, 'Aesthetic Appraisal and Works of Art', *The Oxford Review*, 3, 1966; reprinted in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974), 178–188.

[2] Ibid., 201.

art is. We can aesthetically assess many things that are not works of art, as for example mountains, persons, or bicycles. Nevertheless, Strawson suggests a specificity in the relationship between the work of art and the aesthetic appraisal by stating that 'The criterion of identity of a work of art is the totality of features which are relevant to its aesthetic appraisal'.[3] The idea is that many things can be objects of an aesthetic appraisal, but only works of art are such that their criterion of identity is the totality of their 'merit-conferring' features.[4] Thus, Strawson's definition of art can be summarized as follows:

> (SDA) An individual is a work of art if and only if its *criterion of identity* is the *totality of features* which are relevant to its *aesthetic appraisal*.

SDA has been, so far, largely overlooked in the debate about the definition of art. In this paper I will discuss SDA by spelling out and trying to amend its basic components; namely, 1) the *criterion of identity*; 2) the *merit-conferring features*; and 3) the *aesthetic appraisal*. Finally, I will address some objections that might be raised to a Strawsonian account of art.

1. The Criterion of Identity

Practices of art appreciation draw a distinction between the features of works of art that are merit-conferring and those that are not. Although a particular appraisal usually does not take into account all the merit-conferring features of the work appraised, a feature remains merit-conferring if it might be taken into account by some reasonable appraisal. Imagine two persons debating about a work of art W. One says 'I think W is valuable because p' and the other replies 'No, I don't think so, because q'. The features that are relevant to the aesthetic appraisal of W are all those to which the propositions p and q can make reference in a conversation involving rational speakers and concerning the aesthetic value of W.

According to Strawson the features that constitute the *identity* of a work of art are all and only its merit-conferring features. For example, we treat two copies of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as two instances of the

[3] Ibid., 202.
[4] Ibid., 205.

same work of art since the features in virtue of which they differ, for example the font of the characters, are not relevant to an aesthetic appraisal of *The Waste Land*. No rational speaker would state that *The Waste Land* is a bad poem because the font of its characters is too small. In fact, two proper copies of *The Waste Land* share all the features that are relevant to an aesthetic appraisal of this work, and that is why we treat them as two instances of the *same* work of art.

By appealing to the *criterion of identity*, SDA entails that two things that instantiate the same totality of merit-conferring features are instances of the *same* work of art. Hence, works of art are entities that can be instantiated, namely types. Yet, this upshot seems questionable with respect to works of art that in our practices we treat as being unique particulars, as for example paintings. Strawson faces this objection by biting the bullet, that is, by arguing that any work of art is a type, i.e. a non-particular individual which functions as 'a general rule for the production of its own particular instances'.[5] That is, a work of art *W* functions as a rule that states: 'an instance of *W* should instantiate all of *W*'s merit-conferring features'. According to Strawson, we treat paintings as particular individuals only because we lack techniques that allow us to replicate a painting in a way that preserves all of its merit-conferring features. On closer inspection, a painting is not a particular, but a type of which we are currently unable to produce more than one instance.

The ontological claim that all works of arts are types is highly debatable.[6] This claim is debatable not only in the case of paintings, but also

[5] Ibid., 205. Strawson specifies his account of types in this passage of his book *Individuals* (London: Methuen, 1959), 232–233: "The non-particulars here in question [i.e. types] are all such that their instances are artefacts. But the concepts concerned are not just rather broadly functional, like those of other artefacts such as tables and beds. Rather, to produce an instance, one must conform more or less closely to more or less exact specifications. Fully to describe a non-particular of this kind is to specify a particular, with a high degree of precision and internal elaboration".

[6] For a defense: Gregory Currie, *An Ontology of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1989); David Davies, 'Multiple Instances and Multiple 'Instances'', *BJA*, 50, 4 (2010), 411–26; Andrew Harrison, 'Works of Art and Other Cultural Objects', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 68 (1967), 105–128.

For a criticism: Sherri Irvin, 'The Ontological Diversity of Visual Artworks', in Kathleen Stock and Katherine Thomson-Jones (eds.), *New Waves in Aesthetics* (Houndmills: Pal-

in that of performances, especially those involving improvisation. More generally, Strawson's ontological claim is debatable in the case of works of art that are, more or less explicitly, intended by their makers to be particulars and not types. As Sherri Irvin puts it, "Ontological status, like other elements of a work form, is a resource artists can use to imbue their works with meaning".[7]

That being the case, it would be worthwhile to disentangle Strawson's definition of art from his ontology of art. I argue that we can do so by turning what Strawson calls "the criterion of identity of works of art" into a much less ontologically demanding 'criterion of appreciation'. Whatever its criterion of identity, a work of art essentially has a *criterion of appreciation*, which establishes the totality of *specific* features that are relevant to its aesthetic appraisal. For example, the criterion of appreciation of a painting establishes which specific colours and which specific shapes this painting ought to have in order to be properly appreciated.

The notion of a criterion of appreciation is strictly connected to that of a *suitable appreciator* since the former establishes all the features that the latter should take into account. That is to say that the work of art is not only something to be appraised, but something to be appraised in a specific way, namely, in the way in which a suitable appreciator should appraise it. This specificity does not concern the normative content of the appraisal (e.g. good, bad, beautiful, ugly) but the descriptive features to be taken into account in order to properly formulate the appraisal.

The work of art is an entity with a special status, a special power within a certain community; it is a social object, that is, following John Searle's formulation, an entity X on which a community bestows a status function Y, which involves rights and duties, commitments and entitlements. The status function of the work of art is precisely its criterion of appreciation. The work of art is an entity that we are mandated to appreciate as a suitable appreciator would do, that is, by taking into account the totality of its merit-conferring features. The distinctive power of the work of art as a social object is its prescription to assess it, and to assess it in a special way

grave Macmillan, 2008), 1–19; Anders Pettersson, 'P. F. Strawson and Stephen Davies on the Ontology of Art: A Critical Discussion', *Organon F*, 16 (2009), 615–631; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, (1980).

[7] Irvin, 'The Ontological Diversity of Visual Artworks', 11.

established by the criterion of appreciation. It is worth stressing that the assessment may be either positive or negative. The prescription does not concern the normative content of the assessment but rather the features to be taken into account in formulating the assessment. Thus, this definition makes room for the possibility of bad art. The point is not that the work of art is to be positively assessed. The point is that the work of art is to be assessed, either positively or negatively, and, in principle, all the merit-conferring features specified by the criterion of appreciation should be taken into account in the assessment.

The criterion of appreciation of a work is usually determined by its maker, but it can also be shaped by the cultural practices within which this work is produced and appreciated. In fact, the criterion of appreciation is not a Platonic form, but rather a historical product like a rule of law or a norm of behaviour, and, as such, it can change in virtue of negotiations within cultural practices.

To some extent, the criterion of appreciation is similar to what Irvin calls 'the artist's sanction'. She characterizes the latter in the following way: 'The artist's primary sanction-creating activity, now as before, is to present an *object* within a particular context. When an artist puts forward an object with certain features, he or she is sanctioning the set of *artwork* features that, given the context and the conventions connecting the object and the artwork, the suitably informed audience will take the artwork to have'.[8] Yet, what I call criterion of appreciation differs from Irvin's notion of an artist's sanction in two respects. Firstly, the criterion of appreciation may be established not only by the artist but also by the appreciators, as members of a normative practice. For example, our current criteria of appreciation of some ancient Greek statues establish that they ought to be colourless, although we know that Greek sculptors painted their statues and intended them to be appreciated as coloured.[9] Secondly, Irvin claims that the artist's sanction establishes the features that are relevant to the

[8] Sherri Irvin, 'The Artist's Sanction in Contemporary Art', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 63, 4 (2005), 322.

[9] An analogous historical change in the criterion of appreciation happens in the case of some works of classical music, as argued by Lydia Goehr in her book *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (London: Clarendon Press, 1992).

interpretation of the work; instead, in the Strawsonian view I propose, the criterion of appreciation primarily establishes the features that are relevant to the *aesthetic appraisal* of the work. As I will argue in the third section of this paper, all works of art call for an aesthetic appraisal; yet, it is debatable whether all works of art also call for an interpretation.

To accommodate the above considerations, here is a different formulation of SDA:

> (SDA*) An individual is a work of art if and only if it is to be assessed according to *a criterion of appreciation* establishing the totality of features which are relevant to its aesthetic appraisal.

2. The Merit-Conferring Features

Strawson names the features that are relevant to the aesthetic appraisal of a work of art its *merit-conferring features*, and conceives of them as the features that constitute the work's appearance.[10] Still, as pointed out by such scholars as Kendall Walton, Arthur Danto, and Jerrold Levinson,[11] the features that are relevant to the aesthetic appraisal of a work of art are not always only perceptually manifest features but also hidden relational features, which depend on context and history. Examples of hidden features are 'being created by a certain maker in a certain historical situation' or 'belonging to a certain genre'. Since such features are relevant to the aesthetic appraisal, the criterion of appreciation must concern also them.

Still, there is a sharp difference between the possession of manifest features and that of hidden features. A work of art can lose or lack some manifest features, but it cannot lose or lack those hidden features that are part of its own history. Indeed, what is relevant for appreciation is not just the work's possession of hidden features but the appreciator's epistemic access to them. If the appreciator of a work of art lacks the proper pieces of information about its hidden features, these features are out of reach and cannot contribute to the aesthetic appraisal of that work, even

[10] Strawson, 'Aesthetic Appraisal and Works of Art', 206.

[11] Arthur Danto, 'The Transfiguration of the Commonplace', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 33, 2 (1974), 139–148; Jerrold Levinson, 'What a Musical Work Is', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 70, 1 (1980), 5–28; Kendall Walton, 'Categories of Art', *Philosophical Review*, 79, 3 (1970), 334–367.

though the work keeps having them. Thus, the criterion of appreciation of a work of art *W* establishes that, among *W*'s merit-conferring features, the manifest ones should be exhibited by a perceivable entity while the hidden ones should be knowable by a suitable appreciator of *W*. That is why, I contend, captions and catalogues often play a crucial role in practices of art appreciation.

By including among the merit-conferring features both manifest and hidden features we can effectively take works of contemporary art into account. For example, we can explain the difference between an ordinary urinal and Duchamp's *Fountain* by considering that the latter has a criterion of appreciation that the former lacks, and this criterion includes also hidden features. If this is right, the notion of a criterion of appreciation underlies the process that Danto (1974) names 'the transfiguration of the commonplace',[12] by means of which an ordinary object becomes a work of art. *Fountain* is not any urinal whatever. It is an entity whose proper appreciation requires the experience of certain manifest features and the possession of a certain stock of information about its history of making. Duchamp famously asserted that the urinal that he called *Fountain* was selected for its lack of *aesthetic properties*.[13] Yet, by selecting this urinal and presenting it in a certain context, he bestowed it with a criterion of appreciation and exposed it to an *aesthetic appraisal*.

In discussing the alternative between aesthetic and institutional or historical accounts of art, Nick Zangwill points out that 'the most common objection to any aesthetic account is that it cannot cope with the more experimental products of twentieth-century art',[14] while institutional or historical theories can do so. Yet, a *hybrid* account, which is based on the notion of an *aesthetic* appraisal and on that of an *institutionally* or *historically* established criterion of appreciation, also can cope with 'the more experimental products of twentieth-century art'. It can do so provided that the criterion of appreciation can select both manifest and hidden features as

[12] Danto, 'The Transfiguration of the Commonplace', 139.

[13] Cf. Thomas Adajian, 'The Definition of Art', in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/art-definition/>.

[14] Nick Zangwill, 'The Creative Theory of Art' (1995), *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 32 (1995), 316.

relevant to aesthetic appraisal.

That being the case, we can rephrase SDA* as follows.

> (SDA**) An individual is a work of art if and only if it is to be assessed according to a criterion of appreciation establishing the totality of features, *both manifest and hidden*, which are relevant to its aesthetic appraisal.

3. The Aesthetic Appraisal

The distinction between aesthetic properties and aesthetic appraisal is crucial in order to understand a Strawsonian account of art. Strawson clearly asserts that what he calls merit-conferring features are not the aesthetic properties of the work but the features of the work that are relevant to its aesthetic appraisal. For example exhibiting certain shades of red is not an aesthetic property and nevertheless it is relevant to the aesthetic appraisal of Rothko's painting *Four Darks in Red*. A feature of a work of art that is relevant to its aesthetic appraisal is not "anything which has an evaluative name" but 'something on account of which evaluative names are applied'.[15]

From this perspective, every work of art, even if it lacks aesthetic properties, can still be the object of an aesthetic appraisal. This brings us back to our starting point: "this is a work of art but it is not to be assessed" remains an unacceptable contradiction. The free creativity of the artists has its own limits, like any freedom, and in this case the limits are set by the fact that an artist cannot make a work that is not to be assessed. Even if a certain artist had this intention, her intention would be destined to remain unfulfilled.

Although contemporary art challenges the notion of *aesthetic property* and upsets the notion of *aesthetic attitude*,[16] the notion of *aesthetic appraisal* remains untouched. If there is a revolutionary effect of contemporary art, this is precisely the disentanglement of the notion of *aesthetic appraisal* from those of *aesthetic property* and *aesthetic attitude*. In contemporary art expositions, there may be works that lack relevant aesthetic properties,

[15] Strawson, 'Aesthetic Appraisal and Works of Art', 204.

[16] George Dickie, 'The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1.1 (1964), 56–65.

and visitors, unless they are particularly naïve, give up aesthetic attitudes in front of such works. Nevertheless, even the most skilled and experienced visitors do not give up the aesthetic appraisal. Contemporary art does not rule art criticism out. Rather, it favours a special kind of art criticism, which can make aesthetic appraisals in spite of the lack of aesthetic properties and aesthetic attitudes.

From Strawson's perspective, the aesthetic appraisal can be disentangled from the notion of aesthetic property and aesthetic attitude since what makes an appraisal aesthetic is not which entities it is about, or which experiential states it is accompanied by, but its own way of being an appraisal. More specifically, Strawson states that, with respect to other kinds of appraisals, as for example moral appraisal, aesthetic appraisal is such that 'to the former [...] general rules and principles are essential; to the latter, quite irrelevant'.[17] Thus, according to Strawson, the hallmark of the aesthetic appraisal is its independence from general rules and principles.

I argue that we need a more detailed account of the aesthetic appraisal in order to use it as a component of a definition of art. The independence from general rules and principles is arguably an important characteristic of the aesthetic appraisal, but there are more fundamental components, which can be found in Kant's basic conception of the judgment of taste, namely in what Zangwill calls 'an *austere* explanation of what Kant means'.[18]

From this perspective, the essential components of an aesthetic appraisal are its *subjectivity*, i.e. its deriving from subjective states of pleasure or displeasure, and its *normativity*, i.e. its making claim to correctness, thereby requiring that other subjects share this appraisal. Such a normative request of sharing involves that the value the appraisal ascribes to a certain object does depend neither on the appraisal itself nor on the appraising subject, but rather on some publicly shareable features of this very object, which constitute the 'dependence base' of its value.[19]

Thus, Strawson is arguably right is stating that an aesthetic appraisal is such that "what is said in amplification and support [of this appraisal]

[17] Strawson, 'Aesthetic Appraisal and Works of Art', 200.

[18] Nick Zangwill, 'Aesthetic Judgment', in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/aesthetic-judgment/>.

[19] Zangwill, 'Aesthetic Judgment'.

is not general, but consists essentially in drawing attention to particular features or parts of the object praised, and their relations to each other in the object".[20] Yet, this is not the whole story. Such 'particular features or parts of the object praised, and their relations to each other in the object', in fact, constitute a 'dependence base' for the value that the aesthetic appraisal ascribes to its object. I argue that, when the appraised object is a work of art, its 'dependence base' is established by its criterion of appreciation. This leads us to:

> (SDA***) An individual is a work of art if and only if it is to be assessed according to a criterion of appreciation establishing the totality of features, both manifest and hidden, which are relevant to its *aesthetic appraisal*, i.e. an evaluation that a) derives from a subjective state of pleasure or displeasure; b) makes claim to correctness; and c) attributes to the object a value that depends neither on the appraisal itself nor on the appraising subject, but rather on a publicly shareable 'dependence base'.

Ultimately, a work of art is an object the aesthetic appraisal of which is socially governed by a specific criterion of appreciation, which is bestowed on this object thereby publicly establishing the "dependence base" of its value. By constituting a work of art in this way, the criterion of appreciation enables practices of art criticism, which consist in arguing for a certain aesthetic appraisal of a work by making reference to the features established by the criterion of appreciation of that work. Likewise, the criterion of appreciation enables practices of conservation, which consist in attempts to keep a certain work of art in the state specified by its criterion of appreciation; and also practices of restoration, which consist in attempts to bring a certain work of art back to the state specified by its criterion of appreciation.

4. Counterexamples and Objections

In order to defend my Strawsonian account of the work of art as an individual entity bestowed with a criterion of appreciation establishing the

[20] Strawson, 'Aesthetic Appraisal and Works of Art', 200.

totality of its merit-conferring features, I shall argue that *all* works of arts have this criterion (*necessity claim*), and *nothing but* works of art has it (*sufficiency claim*). That is to say that SDA*** shall face two kinds of counterexamples, namely *alleged false positives* and *alleged false negatives*. The alleged false positives threaten the necessity claim since such entities seem capable of satisfying the definition but we are not inclined to treat them as works of art. The alleged false negatives threaten the sufficiency claim since we are inclined to treat such entities as works of art but they seem incapable of satisfying the definition. I will start by addressing objections concerning false positives and then I will turn to objections concerning false negatives.

4.1. Alleged False Positives

The Strawsonian definition of the work of art I am defending has two components, namely, a normative one and an aesthetic one. The *normative* component states that the criterion of appreciation specifies how a certain work of art *ought* to be appreciated by specifying which features of this work are relevant to its appreciation. The *aesthetic* component states that this appreciation is an *aesthetic* appreciation. The general strategy I will adopt in order to face alleged false positives consists in showing that a certain entity, which is not a work of art and yet seems capable of satisfying the definition, in fact satisfies only one component, either the aesthetic or the normative one. On the one hand, there are things that are objects of aesthetic appreciation but not in a way that is governed by a criterion of appreciation. On the other hand, there are things that are governed by some normative criterion but this criterion does not specifically concern their aesthetic appreciation. In this way, I will defend the claim that the possession of a criterion of appreciation is necessary for an entity to be a work of art.

Objects that cannot be works of art

Many entities are objects of aesthetic appreciation and nevertheless they are clearly not works of art. Consider the Moon. It can be the object of aesthetic appreciation, and nevertheless it is not a work of art. Yet the Moon is not a false positive for our definition, since it can be an object

of aesthetic appreciation but it lacks a criterion of appreciation. In our cultural practices, there is no prescription to assess the Moon, and there is no *proper way* in which the Moon *ought to* be aesthetically appreciated. There is no particular colour or shape that the Moon *ought to* have in order to be properly appreciated. These features can change and we can keep aesthetically appreciating the Moon without the need to restore its previous features. Nor do we need a stock of information about the Moon's history in order to properly appreciate it. In sum, the Moon and a work of art may be both objects of aesthetic appreciation but only the work of art has a criterion of appreciation that mandates us to assess it and establishes the features which are relevant to its aesthetic appraisal.

Objects that are not works of art but can become works of art

A similar strategy can be used in order to explain why such artefacts as clothes can be objects of aesthetic appreciation but are not works of art. Consider a particular suit. You can appreciate its colour, its shape, its texture. Yet suits normally do not mandate us to appreciate them according to their criteria of appreciation as works of art do. One could object that in order to properly appreciate a suit this should have the features it was originally designed to have, and in this sense also a suit has a criterion of appreciation. But this is not the way in which we normally appreciate clothes in our cultural practices. We do not care whether we are appreciating a suit as having all the manifest features it should have, or whether we have the information about its history that we need in order to properly appreciate it. At most, we *mend* clothes, but we do not *restore* them. In our cultural practices we just appreciate a suit for the features it currently exhibits, regardless of the features it should exhibit in virtue of being that individual suit, and regardless of what we should know about its history. We like or dislike it, and that is all. Suits just have occasional appreciators, not suitable appreciators.

Nevertheless, nothing prevents us from starting to appreciate clothes by bestowing criteria of appreciation on them. Maybe there already are clothes that are appreciated in this way in some cultural practices. In this case, I simply acknowledge that these clothes are treated as works of art, at least within the community that bestows a criterion of appreciation on

them. This seems to be precisely the way in which something starts being treated as a work of art. For example, films started being appreciated as works of art when communities of appreciators started bestowing criteria of appreciation on them. The first appreciators of cinema as art did not content themselves to enjoy a film, but aimed at appraising a film properly screened while having all the relevant information about its history. In this way, in the first decades of the XX century, some films started to be treated as works of art. Nothing prevents us from ontologically upgrading clothes in a similar manner.

A similar argument can be provided in the case of food and wine. Usually, when we appreciate a particular apple pie, we do not bestow a criterion of appreciation on it. Eating an apple pie does not involve a prescription to assess it as a suitable appreciator would do. Certainly an apple pie should be in a certain way in order to be an apple pie, for example it should be made of apples. But this sort of constraints concerns the general features that this entity should have in order to belong to the kind of apple pies, not the individual features that this apple pie should have in order to be properly appreciated for the individual apple pie it is. It is worth noting that the criterion of appreciation of a certain work of art establishes *all* the *specific* features of this *individual* work that are relevant to its appreciation, not just the kind to which this work belongs. By contrast, when we appreciate an apple pie, we care at most whether we are really appreciating an apple pie and not a cheesecake, or whether this apple pie is fresh. In fact, what matters for the appraisal of an apple pie is whether it tastes good or it does not. We do not care about its complying with an alleged criterion of appreciation specifically bestowed on this particular object.

Still, nothing prevents the members of a community from starting to appreciate an apple pie by caring whether it has all the features that it should have in order to be properly appreciated, and also whether they have the information one should possess in order to properly appreciate this pie. In this case it seems to be reasonable to acknowledge that they are treating this apple pie as a work of art. Dishes or wines become serious candidates to the status of work of art precisely when they are not only aesthetically appreciated but also bestowed upon with criteria of appreciation within a practice of food and wine criticism. Treating a particular wine as a work of art involves that this wine should be appraised not simply for

what it currently tastes like, but rather for what it should taste like for a suitable drinker, i.e., a drinker who can experience all the relevant manifest features of that wine and has access to all the relevant information about its history of making.

Kinds having some instances that are works of art and others that are not

The notion of a criterion of appreciation provides us with an effective explanation of why some members of a certain kind are treated as works of art and other members of the same kind are not. Consider buildings. We treat some of them as works of architectural art but not others. This corresponds to the fact that in our cultural practices we bestow criteria of appreciation on the former but not on the latter. We appreciate an ordinary building simply for what it is, whereas in appreciating a building that we consider a work of art we care whether we are taking the proper features into account, and whether we have the relevant information that allows us to properly appreciate it.

The same attitude shows up if we compare the maintenance of buildings in general with the maintenance of buildings that are considered works of art. In both cases, the maintenance can concern not only features that are merely functional but also features that are aesthetically relevant. Nevertheless, only in the case of works of art the maintenance is committed to a criterion of appreciation, which establishes the features that should be maintained in order to warrant a proper appreciation of the building in question. Interestingly, the maintenance of buildings that are considered works of art often involves also the addition of some caption or legend that allows beholders to supplement the manifest properties of the building with knowledge about its hidden historical properties.

A criterion of appreciation allows us to distinguish works of art from ordinary objects of the same kind also in the case of images or texts. For example a certain poem is a work of art while a certain article in a newspaper is not, in spite of the fact that they are both texts. The reason, I argue, is that the article lacks a criterion of *aesthetic* appreciation. We can aesthetically appreciate the article, but we do so simply by reading it. We do not care whether the article we are reading is exactly how it should be in order to enable a proper *aesthetic* appreciation of it, and whether we have

the proper stock of information that allows us to enjoy a proper *aesthetic* appreciation of it.

One might object that both the article and the poem have conditions of correctness since they should not contain typos. Yet such requirements, in the case of the article, do not constitute a criterion of *aesthetic* appreciation. According to our cultural practices, the suitable reader of an article, unlike the suitable reader of a poem, does not base her judgement on this article upon a totality of features that are relevant to its *aesthetic* appraisal. Rather, the readers of an article are basically interested in what is communicated by it, and the conditions of correctness of that article just aim at warranting the proper understanding of its meaning. Hence, a translation in a foreign language does not generally affect the proper appreciation of an article provided that its meaning is preserved. By contrast, the translation in a foreign language significantly affects the appreciation of a poem whose criterion of appreciation establishes that a suitable appreciator, in order to properly appraise this poem *aesthetically*, should read it in the language in which it was written.

A similar discourse can be made for images. In our culture, some images have a special status that mandates us to assess them as a suitable appreciator would do, that is, by taking into account the totality of their merit-conferring features. There are the images that we treat as works of art. Yet, many other images that we can find in magazines or websites do not mandate us to assess them in specific ways. We can assess them if we want, but there is no prescription to assess, and there is no criterion of appreciation that specifies such a prescription.

4.2 Alleged False Negatives

With respect to the Strawsonian definition of art I am proposing, alleged false negatives are things that seem to lack a genuine criterion of appreciation and nevertheless, in our cultural practices, we are inclined to treat as works of art. I will argue that a closer inspection of such things reveals an underlying criterion of appreciation, which may be not as evident as in other cases but still governs our aesthetic appraisal of the things that we treat as works of art.

Functional works

Some works of art fulfil a function that does not consist simply in being the possible object of an aesthetic appraisal. Noël Carroll discusses the interesting case of memorial art,[21] but one can consider other cases of 'functional works' such as works of propaganda art, works of religious art, or works of pornographic art. Furthermore, most works of architectural art surely fall into the category of what I call 'functional works of art'.

My point is that having a function is not incompatible with having a criterion of appreciation that specifies the totality of features that are relevant to their aesthetic appraisal. On the one hand, the criterion of appreciation is precisely what differentiates functional works of art from other similar things that fulfil the same function but that we do not treat as works of art. On the other hand, functional works of art differ from purportedly functionless works of arts because the criterion of appreciation of the former establishes, among other things, that the function they fulfil is relevant to the aesthetic appraisal of the work. In other words, the way in which a functional work fulfils its function is a hidden feature, which is part of the "dependence base" of the aesthetic appraisal of this work. For example, 'being a work of Nazi propaganda' surely is a hidden feature that a suitable appreciator of Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph des Willens* ought to take as relevant to the aesthetic appraisal of this work of art.

Damaged works

In our cultural practices, we appreciate some works of art in spite of the fact that they are damaged and therefore they do not comply with their criterion of appreciation anymore. For example, we keep on appreciating Leonardo's *Cenacolo* as a work of art in spite of the fact that the totality of features possessed by the particular object we can currently find in the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan does no longer comply with the criterion of appreciation established by Leonardo when he painted the fresco.

My explanation is that the criterion of appreciation of damaged works of art becomes twofold. On the one hand, we know that these works are

[21] Noël Carroll, 'Art and Recollection', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 39, 2 (2005), 1-12.

not how they ought to be, that is, they do not fit their primary criterion of appreciation, and that is why we have practices of art restoration. On the other hand, inasmuch as a satisfying restoration is not possible, we bestow upon a damaged work a secondary criterion of appreciation, i.e. a substitute, a criterion of appreciation *faute de mieux*. This criterion *specifies how this work ought to be*, in order to be properly appreciated, having acknowledged that the primary criterion of appreciation cannot be satisfied anymore.

Absolute performances

One might wonder whether works of art that aim at the absolute singularity of an event, as for example certain performances by Marina Abramovich,[22] really involve a criterion of appreciation. I argue that they do, though in a peculiar way. In a performance of this sort, the criterion of appreciation specifies that the merit-conferring features are inextricable from the event itself, and therefore they should be experienced by attending that particular event. Let us call 'absolute performance' a work of art that consists in a performance and whose criterion of appreciation establishes that only a beholder that is present in the particular context of that performance can properly appreciate that work.

In the case of an *absolute* performance, a recording cannot count as an instance of the work. It counts, at most, as a representation of it, just as a photograph of a painting does not count as an instance of that painting but only as a representation of it. The difference is that a painting, as a material object, remains in principle accessible to any viewer, unless it is highly damaged or destroyed, whereas a performance, as an event, could only be properly appreciated by the audience that attended it while it was occurring. In this sense the criterion of appreciation of an absolute performance sets a significant limit on the number of spectators that can have a proper experience, and a proper appraisal, of that work of art. Finally, it is worth noting that sport events, as events, are ontologically similar to artistic performances, but, unlike the latter, they generally lack criteria of appreciation that govern their *aesthetic* appraisal.

[22] According to David Davies, another example of absolute performance is *The Köln Concert* by Keith Jarrett; cf. Davies, 'Multiple Instances and Multiple 'Instances", 425.

Process works

Works of art such as Urs Fischer's self-destructing wax candle sculptures in turn are similar to the 'absolute performances' discussed above. What matters for the proper appreciation of Fischer's wax sculptures, indeed, is not just the sculpture as a concrete object but rather the process through which the sculpture decays into a mere lump of wax. Still such a 'process work', unlike an absolute performance, does not seem to require that a suitable appreciator attend the totality of the event, which might last several days or even months. This seems to be too demanding a requirement for a human being, even if he or she is an art appreciator. Similarly, Andy Warhol's *Empire* and Christian Marclay's *The Clock* are cinematic works of art whose excessive duration challenges the cognitive endurance of appreciators. A limit case in this sense is *Organ²/ASLSP*, the performance of a musical piece by John Cage, which began in 2001 at St. Burchardi church in Halberstadt, Germany, and is scheduled to have a duration of 639 years, ending in 2640.

My explanation is that such 'process works of art' have a twofold criterion of appreciation, much as damaged works of art do. In the case of process works, the *primary* criterion of appreciation concerns an ideal, possibly non-human, appreciator who would be capable of properly enjoying the work in its entire duration. Yet, since human beings surely are empirically incapable of fitting so demanding a criterion, the work also has a *secondary* criterion of appreciation. This criterion is, just as in the case of damaged works, *a substitute, a criterion of appreciation faute de mieux*. T*he criterion* establishes that a suitable appreciator of a process work should attend some relevant temporal portions of the temporally enormous process that constitutes the work. It is worth noting that the secondary criterion of appreciation plays a key role in the appreciation of both damaged works and process works, but in different ways. In the case of process works, the secondary criterion remedies a shortage of cognitive capacities on the part of the work's appreciator with respect to the primary criterion: by contrast, in the case of damaged works, the secondary criterion remedies a shortage of merit-conferring features on the part of the work itself with respect to the primary criterion.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to develop Strawson's account of the work of art in order to provide a hybrid definition of art, namely SDA***, which has both a historical-institutional component and an aesthetic component. More specifically, I have argued that the historical-institutional framework provides the work of art with a criterion of appreciation that functions as a dependence base for the aesthetic appraisal. I have tried to show that this definition allows us to take into account not only the most typical cases of works of art but also some borderline cases that usually raise serious problems for aesthetic conceptions of art.

An important upshot of the Strawsonian definition of art I have defended is that it shows how practices of criticism, conservation, and restoration are connected to the notion of a work of art. The dependence of the aesthetic appraisal on the criterion of appreciation is arguably the main rule of the language game of art criticism, and practices of art conservation and restoration aim at warranting that this criterion be satisfied so that this game can be correctly played. Since the criterion of appreciation involves not only manifest perceptible properties but also hidden historical properties, the conservation of a certain work of art depends not only on the conservation of material artefacts, but also on the availability of the relevant pieces of information that are needed in order to properly appreciate this work. Thus, also art historians can significantly contribute to the conservation of a work of art through the clarification of its criterion of appreciation. Furthermore, the art critics themselves can in turn contribute to shaping the criterion of appreciation of a certain work by highlighting certain features of it (especially hidden features) which were hitherto overlooked within a certain cultural practice.

Ultimately, the notion of a criterion of appreciation can help us to better understand not only what works of art are, but also what it is to take care of them. Art criticism, art history, art conservation and art restoration are all practices that, though in different ways, essentially concern the criterion of appreciation of a work of art. A proper understanding of the notion of criterion of appreciation might profitably link the philosophical debate on the definition of art to the historical research and critical reflection on works of arts themselves.

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