Terry Barrett

Why Is That Art

Aesthetics and Criticism of Contemporary Art

THIRD EDITION |

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Why Is That Art?

Kiki Smith | *In a Field,* **2002.**

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AESTHETICS AND CRITICISM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Third Edition

TERRY BARRETT

Professor Emeritus
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

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FOR GREG, TIM, KEVIN,

PAUL, QUENTIN, AND NICK

Andres Serrano | *America (Aya Basemath, Convert to Islam)*, **2002.**

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Preface

In this book, theory is made accessible in a way that welcomes readers into critical dialogue about art. Readers will find a wide sampling of kinds of visual artworks, including installations, abstract and representational paintings, monumental sculptures, performance art, and photography. The artists, aestheticians, and critics selected for the book are international (though weighted toward the West) and include men and women as well as persons of color.

Importantly, the book provides readers with a variety of established theories of art, clearly articulated, to account for different kinds of visual art with which readers can approach all art. The book ties theories of art to particular works of art through the writings of art critics, aestheticians, and quotations from artists whose work is presented. *Why Is That Art?* uses the traditional sets of criteria—Realism, Expressionism, and Formalism—and updates them with contemporary sources of Postmodernism, with which one can approach any work of art.

Each aesthetic theory is explained in its context of origin, but from twenty-first-century vantage points. The chapters are in chronological order determined by the history of aesthetics. All theories are put to use by applying them to current art. Old theories are updated with current scholarship through quoted and paraphrased voices of aestheticians, critics, and the artists who made the works being considered. The featured theories are offered with their strengths and weaknesses: that is, what a theory accounts for best in works of art and what it cannot satisfactorily address. Although the tone of the book presents a positive attitude about contemporary art, philosophical aesthetics, and criticism, critical reservations about the artworks and theories are also included through the voices of objecting thinkers.

Readers are encouraged to join a fascinating discourse about contemporary art and theories of art. The book gives them the knowledge they need to enter critical dialogue with a newly gained sense of confidence about contemporary art and how it is judged, a variety of clearly articulated criteria, and reasoned principles with which viewers can form their own judgments. Readers should be left with new attitudes of appreciation for contemporary art, scholarship, and reasoned argumentation.

The book presents sophisticated concepts in a way that is understandable to novice readers but is sufficiently complex to hold the interest of advanced students. *Why Is*

That Art? can serve as a primary text for seminars for art students, students of modern art history, aesthetics courses, and art education. Professors of aesthetics courses and history courses can readily supplement the text with full articles, chapters, or excerpts from philosophers and historians of their choosing. The book is suitable as a supplementary text for courses in historical aesthetics, especially those that use anthologies of philosophers' writings, and courses in modern art history whose texts do not include art, art theory, and criticism of our day.

Many students, at all levels of education, have trouble understanding and appreciating contemporary works of art and the theories that support them. Many students carry misconceptions about judgments of art, too often holding the belief that judgment of art "is all subjective, anyway." *Why Is That Art?* clearly shows that statements of judgments about works of art need to be based on more than personal preference, that sound judgments need to be accompanied by defensible reasons that are implicitly or explicitly based in criteria, and that some judgments are better formulated and argued than others and are thus better.

Unlike individuals' philosophies and histories of art, *Why Is That Art?* is an explanation by the author based on eclectic sources from multiple points of view. The reader will not receive the author's criticism or aesthetics but the views of many different thinkers, some of whom disagree with one another. The point of the book is not to persuade readers toward the author's or any one point of view, but to encourage them to consider many criteria and to choose among them intelligently, critically examine judgments of art made by others, and make informed judgments of their own.

New to This Edition

Along with additions throughout that keep the book current, the most significant changes in this edition are significant clarifications in Chapter 1 that render it easier to follow, and a major revision of the book's conclusion, Chapter 6. In this largely new final chapter, I try to more explicitly show how the many theoretical ideas in the book can be put to immediate practical use by considering works by three newly introduced artists.

The newly chosen works expand the array of artworks already offered in the book with inclusions of an installation by a female of Palestinian origin, Mona Hatoum; a popular mass-audience film by the Japanese artist Takashi Murakami; and a work of Relational Aesthetics made by Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, with a critical examination of that art movement.

More significantly, works by these artists are considered from each of the four theoretical lenses offered in the book. In chapters preceding the revised conclusion, for purposes of clarity, a work of art is considered from a single criterion, either Realism, Cognitive Expressionism, Formalism, or Postmodernism. In the revised Chapter 6, however, individual works of art are considered from each of the four sets of criteria to show that each of these theoretical lenses can yield expanded insights into the art discussed. Although some works of art fit best within the vantage of a single theory, the final chapter shows that all works of art can also be appraised with insightful results by applying each of the four sets of theories to single works of art.

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Why Is That Art?

Introduction

From a very young age, my nephews Nick, Quentin, Paul, Kevin, Tim, and Greg have challenged me with provocative questions such as, "Is *this* art?" "Why is *that* art?" "*Who says* it's art?" I used to color and draw with them around their large kitchen table and now offer suggestions on their drawings or video animations when they ask and take them to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. They show me their latest video games, *anime*, and *manga*. Following a visit to the museum, I recall a conversation with Tim, a grade-schooler at the time, who was persistent in his questions about examples he brought to me of what I call popular visual culture: "Is this art?" With good humor I would give him exaggeratedly firm answers, like "No—it's a comic book." He'd follow with an action figure, to ask if it was art. Eventually I tried to redirect his "Is it art?" question by telling him it really did not matter so much if it was *art*, but if it was *good*. With playful seriousness he brought more examples, and I gave more positive and negative responses about my opinions of their goodness. Eventually I changed the question to "Is it good *of its kind*?"; "How does this action figure compare to your others?"; "Is this comic book better than that comic book? Why do you think so?" I refrained from answering my questions and tried to facilitate his developing his own criteria for his collection of artifacts.

This book is written in that innocent and playful spirit of questioning art, but it provides more traditional as well as contemporary answers about art and its value. It offers a variety of positive answers to common questions viewers raise about contemporary works of art and answers them from three sources: philosophers of art, art critics, and artists.

The book explains ancient and contemporary philosophies of art and art theories and applies each to works of art made recently. It provides the reader with an overview of major aesthetic theories in accessible language. It puts the theories of art into practice by applying them to many different examples of contemporary visual art. It relies on multiple voices from three sets of people: philosophers, art critics, and the artists who made the works that are discussed.

After reading the book, the reader should come away with new knowledge of philosophy and art theory, art criticism, and contemporary art and with four broad perspectives for thinking about these, and should be more comfortable with each. The book should allow readers to join with some confidence an ongoing conversation about intriguing ideas concerning philosophy, art, and life.

1.1 Marcel Duchamp | *Fountain* (second version), **1950.**

Original version produced 1917. Ready-made glazed sanitary china with black paint, 12 inches high. Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection. © Succession Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York 2016.

1 Artworlds and Definitions

HOW *THAT* BECAME ART

This chapter provides an overview of the book by addressing questions such as: What is art? How is it defined? Who decides what qualifies as art? What is art criticism? Who gets to be an art critic?[1] What is aesthetics? Where will this book get me?

Art

In this book, examples of a wide variety of recent works of art are gathered from museums and galleries in major art centers of the world. There are many kinds of artworks, however, that this book does not address explicitly. There is art that is shown and distributed through arts and crafts street fairs, paintings made by people in watercolor societies, images made by members of photography clubs, and the objects of many self-taught artists whose work is referred to as "outsider art" (outside of the mainstream). Nonetheless, the theories considered in this book can be applied to all of these works of art, as well as to objects and images of popular culture that are not usually referred to as "art."

Defining "art" is a major enterprise, historically and recently, in that branch of philosophy called aesthetics or philosophy of art. There are two basic kinds of definitions of the term *art*: (1) *honorific* definitions, which include what is known as the *open* definition, and (2) *classificatory* definitions. Without knowing their distinctions, we often talk past one another, becoming annoyed and somewhat exasperated. For example, Peter, a doctor friend of mine, challenges me about Damien Hirst's iconic sculptures of bisected cows encased in tanks of formaldehyde. He asks me why are they art. They seem to him like the anatomy specimens he studied in premed. They do not at all meet his expectation of what art should look like. Peter is using an honorific sense of art: How in the world do these merit the honor of being called art? To me, they are indisputably works of art: They are made by a recognized artist who considers them art, they are collected as art, preserved as art in prestigious museums, and are showcased in most art books of recent work. I'm using a classificatory definition of art: They are in a museum and not in a biology lab. The classificatory definition excuses me from telling Peter why they are good, which is what he is really asking. I'm content to allow them to

be art and to later, perhaps, decide if they are good works of art and why. I'm avoiding Peter's concerns and I am not at all satisfying his curiosity or addressing his implied charge that Damien Hirst is putting us on.

Honorific Definitions of "Art"

Usually, like Peter, when we say of an object, "That's a work of art," we mean that the object merits the honor of being called art. We often implicitly think of "art" as "good art" or even "great art." Such thinking is routinely reinforced by courses in art history in which all the works studied in a course are implied to be or are explicitly stated to be the best of their kind. The goodness of the works of art studied in art history texts and courses is rarely, if ever, questioned: It is assumed.

The history of Western philosophies of art can be seen as a series of attempts by theorists, including artists, to identify and name the honorable qualities of a good work of art. This book is structured around three major theories that are based in honorific definitions of art: Realism, Expressionism, and Formalism. Each of these tries to determine and assert what qualities an object should or must have if it is to be called "art." Realists, Expressionists, and Formalists try to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions that must be met for something to be called "art": For example, for x to be a work of art it must be made by a human, intended to be a work of art, express something, be aesthetically well formed, and so on. The theories compete with one another. Very briefly, Realists want art to be true as well as beautiful: "Study the science of art. Study the art of science. Develop your senses—especially learn how to see"—Leonardo da Vinci. Expressionists are more concerned with how and what is expressed in a work than its truth, and they have different conceptions of beauty: "Art is meant to disturb, science reassures"—Berthold Brecht, playwright. Formalists care neither about truth nor expression and instead want objects that are formed exquisitely: "Art doesn't transform. It just plain forms"—Roy Lichtenstein, painter.

Postmodern Pluralism is a fourth cluster of theories. Postmodernists turn away from the pursuit of defining what art is or should be, and instead change the direction of the discussion to broader questions about how art functions in society. "The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been concealed by the answers"—James Baldwin, author. Postmodernists replace the certainty that honorific definitions provide with unsettling uncertainties. Postmodernists do not, for example, accept all "masterpieces" to be good or beneficial works of art. Instead they question how something became known as a masterpiece and to what societal effect.

Honorific definitions have some immediate consequences. Some Western definitions of high art that we have inherited from the past century identify art as being valued for its own sake rather than for its functionality. As a result, as aesthetician Stephen Davies points out, such notions bias us "against the possibility of art that is intended to be practically useful, and not to be contemplated solely for its own sake. For example, it is prejudiced against the idea that art can primarily serve domestic, religious, political, or other ritual functions, and it thereby excludes much of what might deserve the title of art,"[2] especially the artifacts of many non-Western

cultures and what has traditionally and often demeaningly been referred to as "women's work."

The Open Definition

When honorific definitions identify essential aspects of a work of art, artists sometimes intentionally defy such definitions, seeking to push boundaries and resist the constraints of theoretical dogma. When art was supposed to be an aesthetically beautiful object made by an artist with the intent of making a work of art, Marcel Duchamp famously entered into a show in New York City in 1917 a used urinal placed on its back on a pedestal in the gallery space, called it *Fountain* (1.1), and signed it with the name R. Mutt. He appropriated a used functional product and positioned it as art. This gesture changed traditional questions of visual worthiness of an art object to different questions, questions that have come to be known as (1) ontological, (2) epistemological, and (3) institutional: (1) What is art? (2) How do we know if something is art? (3) Who decides what is art? With *Fountain*, Duchamp altered the rules of the art game as it was played then, and ever after.

Aesthetician Morris Weitz, following the intellectual lead of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the influential Austrian linguistic philosopher who invented "language games," suggested in 1956[3] that we consider the term *art* to be an "open concept," one that resists definitions based on any set of necessary and sufficient conditions present or forthcoming. Weitz argued that art is a living concept that cannot and ought not be pinned down by one or a set of conditions: The best we can do is point to clear examples of objects that we consider to be works of art and look for family resemblances among other objects that are claimed to be art. Although trying to define *art* is ultimately doomed to failure, Weitz maintained that it is not a useless enterprise: By attempting to name what we honor as art we get clearer about what we value in art. Ultimately, the question is not whether it is art, but whether it is good art. Along with classificatory definitions, Weitz's notion is considered *anti-essentialist* in that it is opposed to definitions that seek to identify absolute essences.

Classificatory Definitions

A classificatory or descriptive definition of art tells us that objects x, y, and z are believed to be works of art, but that objects a, b, and c are not. When an object is said to be "a work of art," it does not necessarily mean that it is a good work of art, but just that it is one of the things that the community counts as art rather than some other kind of object, such as a specimen found in a biology lab. So, by one prominent classificatory definition, if you want to know what art is, go to art museums and look at what they display.

Questions then quickly arise as to the apparent circularity of such a definition of art as that which is in art museums: "Who put *those* objects in the museum?" "*Why* are they considered good enough to be there?" "Is only art that is in a museum 'art'?" Answers come from the institutional definition of art, put forth by two contemporary aestheticians, George Dickie and Arthur Danto.

The institutional definition of art acknowledges an "artworld" and asserts that works of art are dependent on art institutions, art theory, and art history. Dickie stresses functional aspects of art institutions, and Danto stresses the importance of historical contexts in determining works of art.

According to Dickie's first institutional account in 1974, "A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) [that has] a set of the aspects of which it has conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld)."[4] In years following and in response to commentary, Dickie refined his institutional account. Robert Stecker summarizes Dickie's fuller version:

1. An artist is a person who participates with understanding in making a work of art.
2. A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public.
3. A public is a set of persons whose members are prepared in some degree to understand an object that is presented to them.
4. The artworld is the totality of all artworld systems.
5. An artworld system is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an artworld public.[5]

Dickie's fuller idea summarized here is that it is a system of relations rather than one authoritative agent who confers the status of "art" on an object. Many people are part of the artworld, such as artists, curators, collectors, museum directors, gallery directors, critics, historians, and others.

Danto's definition is different from Dickie's in that it is more theoretical than functional. Danto endorses this set of conditions, derived from his writing by fellow aesthetician Noel Carroll:

X is a work of art if and only if

1. X has a subject
2. about which X projects an attitude or point of view
3. by means of rhetorical (usually metaphorical) ellipsis
4. which ellipsis requires audience participation to fill in what is missing (interpretation)
5. where both the work and the interpretation require an art-historical context.[6]

Some scholars object to classificatory definitions because such definitions do not tell us what makes a work of art good, but only that it has the conferred status of "art." Aesthetician Mary Mothersill, for example, complains that the institutional definition "does not seem like a contribution to philosophy but rather a sociological echo or reflection of the market-place."[7]

Nevertheless, in practice, classificatory definitions can be useful in moving a discussion along, especially about a work of art that is under dispute. Instead of wrangling back and forth, "That's not art!" "Yes it is!" "No it's not!" we can accept the authority of an artworld and let the work be called "art" and then move forward with whether it is good art, decide upon what grounds it can be considered good art, or discuss why we think someone may think it is good art.

Each of the theories and definitions of "art" have their strengths and weaknesses, and these are explicated within the forthcoming chapters of the book. The book allows you to decide which theories and ideas you find most compelling and encourages you to put them to use. As aesthetician David Fenner writes, "The fun of philosophizing about theories is in attempting to work out the bugs of whichever theory is most attractive. The key for the reader of aesthetics, then, is to either find a theory whose problems are not overwhelmingly damaging to the view or to find a theory worth saving and begin to address and answer the difficulties."[8]

All of the artworks used in this book are allowed by all three kinds of definitions: honorific, open, and classificatory. Each of the works is honored by many critics, artists, and other members of the artworld as deserving to be called "art" according to one or more of the three (honorific) theories of art: Realism, Expressionism, and Formalism. Each theory is explained and applied to selected artworks in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. Postmodernist theory (Chapter 5) accepts the artworks as given and then bothers them with questions and tentative answers. The art examples in this book also qualify under the open definition: By consensus of many artists, critics, and other scholars of art, they share family resemblances with other known and accepted works of art. The examples also qualify under the classificatory definitions: For example, under Dickie's criteria, each of the artworks reproduced in this book was made by an artist intending to make art and to present it as art, and each is accepted as art by a community of artworld participants.

From this consideration of definitions of art, we can draw some immediate, practical conclusions about any artwork. Honorific definitions of art present us with different lenses by which we can view and consider artworks: Realism, Expressionism, and Formalism. Right now, if I am limited in my taste to one kind of art, Realism, for example, I can perhaps postpone judgment of non-realistic work and consider it through the lenses of Expressionism and Formalism; then I might possibly broaden my horizon for enjoying more kinds of works. The classificatory definition allows us to say, "All right, I'll accept it as an artwork, but I now want to consider whether it is a good work of art and by what criteria." You don't have to like it, but it would be responsible of you as a viewer to tentatively accept it as a work of art, and then decide if it is a good work and by what criteria. To be reactionary and dismissive or unthoughtfully accepting is not to be critical in the sense that this book encourages.

Aesthetics

Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy. The *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* states: "Most definitions of philosophy are fairly controversial, particularly if they aim to be at all interesting or profound. . . . The shortest definition, and it is quite a good one, is that philosophy is thinking about thinking." Philosophy is a second-order activity: thinking about thoughts about the world. Philosophy can also be defined as "rationally critical thinking" about large questions such as the nature of the world (metaphysics), justified beliefs (epistemology), and ways to live (ethics). For example, each of us has some notion of the world and our place in it, but "metaphysics replaces unargued assumptions embodied in such a conception with a rational and organized body of beliefs about the world as a whole."[9]

Philosophers generally agree that the methods of philosophy are rational inquiry, critical thinking of a more or less systematic kind, and rational argument characterized by logical thinking. Further, philosophy is usually distinguished from empirical science and religion. Questions of science are typically answered by observation and experiment; religion is dependent on faith and usually revelation, whereas questions of philosophy are not answered by means of religious revelations or theological explanations.

The three terms *aesthetics* and *philosophy of art* and *art theory* overlap but are not synonymous. The term *aesthetics* has many different uses. This book (usually) uses *aesthetics* synonymously with "philosophy of art." Philosophy of art includes questions and answers about the nature of art (and whether it has a nature), definitions of art and whether it can or should be defined, beauty, proper or desired responses to art or beauty, nature, relations between ethics and aesthetics, the validity or desirability of political responses to art, topics about meaning and understanding of works of art, questions of value and on what bases the values are formed, if judgments are subjective or objective, whether all art is good, and so forth. Answers vary greatly, but the questions in the hands of most artists, critics, and aestheticians are not "up for grabs." Various questions receive thoughtful, competing answers from different thinkers for differing reasons, and these differences and similarities can enlighten us about art, the world, and people. Aesthetics and criticism are ongoing discussions that are open to revisions based on reasoned dialogue.

About philosophy of art, Richard Shusterman asserts, "The task of aesthetic theory, then, is not to capture the truth of our current understanding of art, but rather to reconceive art so as to enhance its role and appreciation. The ultimate goal is not knowledge but improved experience, though truth and knowledge should, of course, be indispensable to achieving this."[10]

Aesthetics, however, can also refer to one's taste in art or sensibilities regarding things artistically: "Her aesthetic is very austere." Aesthetics also can qualify an experience as an "aesthetic experience," and a value as "an aesthetic value." We also talk of a "formalist aesthetic" or a "feminist aesthetic," referring to criteria by which some judge art.

The following chapters are written with the goal of clarifying our notions of the field of aesthetics, the various roles art plays in society, and how we might appreciate art (or negatively appraise it) through philosophical thinking about it and its effects on us and the world. This book does not intentionally or explicitly endorse any one single theory of art, and it tries to present many theories fairly and with sympathy along with criticality.

The term *art theory* today is more commonly used than "aesthetics" by the contemporary art press, artists, and in departments of art. This book attempts to bridge the "traditional aesthetics" that Anglo-American audiences often receive in aesthetics courses through the study of philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, John Dewey, and so forth with "art theory" that is heavily influenced by "French theory" and what is loosely called "postmodernism." Philosophy students will probably be more familiar with the term *aesthetics* and art students with the term *art theory*.

Authors publishing in the journal *October* who have written the book *Art Since 1900* provide a succinct context for the emergence of art theory in the 1970s, for which they partly credit themselves:

> The seventies witnessed an unprecedented flourishing of journals of criticism. During this time, critical theory became a dynamic part of cultural practice: if an avant-garde existed anywhere, it might be argued, it existed there—in such publications as *Interfunktionen* in Germany, *Macula* in France, *Screen* in Britain, and *October* in the United States. More politically committed than traditional philosophy, but also more intellectually rigorous than conventional criticism, such theory was interdisciplinary in its very nature: Some versions attempted to reconcile different modes of analysis (e.g., Marxism and Freudianism, or feminist inquiry and film studies), while others applied one model to a wide range of practices (e.g., the structure of language adapted to the study of art, architecture, and cinema). The master thinkers who had emerged in France in the 1950s and 1960s, such as the structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser, the structuralist psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and the poststructuralist philosophers and critics Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Jean-François Lyotard, were already influenced by modernist poets, filmmakers, writers, and artists, so that the application of such "French theory" to visual art seemed logical.[11]

Chapter 5 explores Postmodernist criticism and art theory and the influences and authors mentioned in the quotation.

Art Criticism

The term *art criticism* is complex. Aesthetician Morris Weitz defines criticism as "a form of studied discourse about works of art. It is a use of language designed to facilitate and enrich the understanding of art."[12] Marcia Eaton, an aesthetician, says that criticism "invites people to pay attention to special things." She adds that critics "*point* to things that can be perceived and at the same time *direct* our perception"; when criticism is good, "we go on to see for ourselves; we continue on our own."[13]

Criticism is informed discourse about art to increase understanding and appreciation of art. This definition includes criticism of all art forms, including dance, theater, music, poetry, painting, and photography criticism. *Discourse* includes talking and writing, and many interviews of artists are quoted in forthcoming chapters. *Informed* is an important qualifier that distinguishes criticism from mere talk and uninformed opinions about art. Not all writing about art is criticism. Some art writing is journalism rather than criticism: It is news reporting on artists and artworld events.

Criticism is a means toward the end of understanding and appreciation or informed lack of appreciation. In some cases, a carefully thought-out response to an artwork may result in negative appreciation or informed dislike. More often than not, however, especially when considering the work of prominent artists, careful critical attention will result in fuller understanding and positive appreciation. Criticism very often results in what Harry Broudy, a philosopher who promoted aesthetic education, called "enlightened cherishing."[14] Broudy's "enlightened cherishing" is a compound concept