

Experimental art

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Abstract

*I point out in this paper that the inscription ‘art’ is a homonym. Primarily, it names the category of **memetic innovation**, illustrations of which are encountered in every cultural domain. Thus, art may be—but is not necessarily—encountered in the artworld, where the makers of works of art use a different word with the same spelling to name a class of artefacts.*

I explain memetic innovation and the potency of memes in terms of a theory of cultural evolution that precisely parallels the Darwinian account of biological evolution.

The term ‘experimental art’ is elucidated as a tautology. That is to say, experimental art is not one sort of art but the only sort of art. If art is encountered in a work of art this is a matter of accident: such encounters are not, and cannot be, a predictable consequence of the purposeful deployment of familiar memes by the maker of the work in which it is found.

A few implications of these extremely fundamental points are briefly sketched; notably the attraction that has been felt by ambitious artists toward the cultural domains of science and technology.

This paper summarizes various accounts of art, evolution and cultural history that have already appeared in print¹. Its relevance in the present context is due mainly to the attention paid to the expression ‘experimental art’.

‘Art’ is a homonym

The first foundational point I want to make is that the artworld is bemused by a deceptive pair of words with identical spelling, as ‘a-r-t.’ Homonymic words are rarely so troublesome as this. Few people are tempted to deposit their savings in a bank whereon the wild thyme grows. Seductions like this are normally resistible. Only in the artworld are two entirely different words, identically

spelled, conflated not just occasionally and innocently but regularly and even wilfully.

One of them is the collective name for the *class of works of art*: ie, paintings, sculptures, poems, symphonies and so on. Art galleries are places where typical items from the class of works of art are stored and displayed. They are where one goes to look at art. On this understanding, if all the works of art in the world were to be summoned up before the mind's eye for inspection, then all other things in the world—all the marsupial mice, the hire-purchase contracts, the centrifugal sludge pumps and so on—are *not* art.

The other word with the same spelling is the one we use when we talk about the art of mathematics, the art of marriage counselling, the art of motor cycle maintenance, and so on. The denotation of this other word is notoriously hard to fix, but it is most certainly not a class of artefacts. Nevertheless it is an indispensable word; for without it we could not make a contrast that we need to make: namely the categorical contrast with skill or craftsmanship no matter how refined it may be, or how much admired.

Art is something that people can't be taught to make, as all but a few can be taught to make filo pastry. It is something that people don't get any better at making by studying a textbook or by practising for sixteen hours a day. Art is unexpected. It takes us by surprise if not always by delight, and it does so in every domain of cultural life. It is even something that we encounter—perhaps not as often as we might wish—in art galleries.

By far the more important of these two words is the second one: not the class of works of art but the art that is as manifest in the worlds of politics, morality, cosmology and trauma counselling as it is in the artworld. The artworld is the curious domain in which a self-serving appropriation of these two very different words was mainly an intellectual frolic of the Enlightenment. A figment of the philosophical imagination called 'the aesthetic' was assigned the role of welding them together so seamlessly that they might as well be one. *Aesthetics*:

*The Philosophy of Art*² became the generic book title in a lush new field of scholarship.

This crime of miscegenation was first seriously challenged (albeit in an intuitive way) by Marcel Duchamp early in the 20th century. Even some fifty years later, when the so-called *Institutional Theory of Art*³ supervened over the traditional essentialisms, the formal exposure of the trick remained indistinct. Aesthetics are glutinous.

The Institutional Theory of Art is, of course, absolutely right about the way in which *works of art* are identified. But unfortunately and despite its name it gets no grip at all on the question of what *art* is. In fact, the Institutional Theory of Art is not a theory of *art* at all. What it correctly recognises is that *works of art* are whatever the artworld chooses to endorse as works of art, for whatever reason or for no reason. In much the same way, a sacred site is whatever a religious or quasi-religious institution chooses to endorse as a sacred site, for whatever reason or for no reason.

Art, on the other hand, is *not* whatever the artworld chooses to endorse as a work of art. Art is whatever it always was, long before there was an artworld with its socially underwritten power of endorsement.

There is insufficient time here and now to make the case on which the Institutional Theory partly rests: namely, that the traditional essentialist theories of art all fail. Art is not Beauty or Aesthetic Goodness or Intuition-expression or Catharsis. It is not even Revelation (although Revelation comes closest to the mark). Art is *memetic innovation*. I shall try to suggest in a few words what this means, and why it is that artists do not need to know this. If possession of such knowledge had been a necessary condition for making works of art, then the great galleries of the world would be sparsely furnished indeed.

In spite of this many artists do show a flicker of interest in the question, but the small philosophical flame is easily extinguished either by the smothering blanket of aesthetics or by the gale of rhetoric that blows from political ideologues and identity politicians.⁴

‘Evolution’ is not a homonym

The art that shapes our lives in every cultural domain, and is much older than the artworld, is the driver of cultural evolution. It is that without which *cultural kinds* could not have emerged and—had they somehow magically done so—would have persisted eternally unchanged like the species of Creationist fantasy. They would not have histories. *Memetic innovation* is that which gives historical shape to cultural evolution, just as *genetic variation* is that which gives historical shape to biological evolution.

Unlike the inscription ‘art,’ the inscription ‘evolution’ is not a homonym. It is not even a word with a literal and a metaphorical sense. The evolution of cultural kinds is just as literal as the evolution of biological kinds. The expression ‘cultural evolution’ is no mere figure of speech.

Consider first the Darwinian account of biological evolution⁵. Living organisms present themselves in distinguishable kinds, or ‘species’⁶, each of which has its own distinctive evolutionary history. The emergence of each species, its persistence, its modifications and its final extinction are lucidly explicable in the following way.

- (a) The genes responsible for generating the items of a biological kind are *replicated* (Although Darwin didn’t know it, the splitting of DNA is implicated here); and
- (b) the replication of genes is inexact, so that genetically replicated items of a kind are not identical; and
- (c) variant items of a kind are differentially well adapted to the changing environments in which they find themselves; and
- (d) those items that adapt most successfully to changing environments are most prolifically replicated.

This pattern is exactly paralleled by the evolution of cultural kinds, such as the wedding ceremony, the agricultural tractor and the Impressionist painting. Items of cultural kinds are perpetuated not by virtue of the *replication of genes* but by virtue of the *imitation of memes*. Here is the matching story about cultural kinds.

- (a) The memes responsible for generating the items of a cultural kind are *imitated* (mirror neurons are surely implicated here); and
- (b) the imitation of memes is inexact, so that memetically imitated items of a kind are not identical; and
- (c) variant items of a kind are differentially well adapted to the changing environments in which they find themselves; and
- (d) those items that adapt most successfully to changing environments are the most prolifically imitated.

In these explanatory stories (or *histories*) the role of the meme in culture corresponds exactly to that of the gene in biology. But there is an important caveat. Genes cannot themselves count as items of a biological kind, or species. Genes (operating always in an orchestrated way with other genes) are the *generators* of the items of various biological kinds. Meme theorists, following Richard Dawkins, usually get this wrong. When challenged to illustrate the meme they almost invariably offer such examples as the catch-phrase, or the popular song. But catch-phrases and popular songs are *not* memes. A popular song is an item of a distinctive cultural kind that has been generated by a concerted deployment of memes, just as a kangaroo is an item of a distinctive biological kind that has been generated by a concerted activation of genes. Imagine a biologist holding up a kangaroo as an example of a gene.

Memes are *regularly efficacious actions*, purposefully performed with the intention of generating an item of a recognisable cultural kind. they are not items of the kinds that are generated by performing these actions. A poached egg is not a meme. A poached egg is an item of a cultural kind that is generated by purposefully orchestrating such familiar memes as lighting the gas, boiling some water, cracking an egg, watching the clock; and so on.

There is a lot of theory compressed in here, but one consideration stands out. Cultural evolution relies as crucially upon the imperfect imitation of memes as biological evolution relies upon the imperfect replication of genes. There would be no evolution either in biology or in culture if there were no accidents, no mishaps, no incursions of the unexpected. The sheer persistence of a kind relies upon regular and predictable replication or imitation, but the historical shaping

and changing of a kind depends upon the emergence of unexpected variations and unintended outcomes.

An identification of art with the emergence of unintended but opportunistically successful memes explains why cultural kinds have histories. Their persistence is explicable in one way, but their emergence, their historical shaping and their ultimate extinction is explicable in an entirely different way. Skill and art go hand in hand.

‘Experiment’ has two senses

Which brings me to the word ‘experiment’ which—unlike the word ‘evolution’—most definitely has two senses.

The more potent of them is, on the face of it, the less reputable. It is the sense in which the gesturing experimenter does not have the slightest idea what to expect, even within a range of probabilities. This is the sense of ‘experiment’ in which, as an eager child, I took my first chemistry set into the garage to perform experiments. There was an instruction book explaining the familiar memes of chemistry, but I was too impatient to read it. I simply added some blue crystals to a yellowish fluid that I extracted from a bottle with a warning label. Nothing much happened. But it might have done. I might have discovered how to make a more terrible smell or a bigger bang than I could have generated by exercising any of the familiar memes of chemistry.

This is the sense of ‘experiment’ in which the experimenter lurches optimistically around in a limbo of ignorance. It is the sense in which, in the course of doing something one does know how to do, such as boiling urine, one discovers how to do something that one did not know how to do. This malodorous example is of course drawn from Joseph Wright’s wonderful picture, *The Alchemist in search of the Philosopher’s stone Discovers Phosphorus* (1771). Following this epiphany alchemists everywhere became capable of making phosphorus. A new meme had emerged.

The other sense of the word ‘experiment,’ to which science has recently given more respectability, is different. This is the sense in which an experimenter purposefully deploys familiar sets of memes with the expectation of generating results that will falsify (or fail to falsify) some theory or hypothesis. I apologise to those philosophers of science who have moved on since Popper, and say no more about this because it is at least obvious that the mindset of the scientist, considered as a purposeful scientific-theory-maker, is no different from that of the artist considered as a purposeful work-of-art-maker. They both know very well how to set about making recognisable items of their respective cultural kinds.

‘Experimental art’ is a tautology

So, drawing several of these threads together, I am saying that when we use the word ‘experiment’ in its most primitive and potent sense, the expression ‘experimental art’ is a tautology. In the sense of ‘experiment’ in which the outcome of the behaviour is not anticipated, art *cannot but* be experimental. To say that a meme is new is to say that a behaviour or set of behaviours has unexpectedly acquired a regularly useful purpose. It has become an action that is now regularly imitable, not only by its discoverer but also by other people. Our collective powers have been extended. It is fair comment to suggest that although the Revelation Theory of Art had its head in the clouds, its feet were always on the ground.

Ordinary conversation tends to conflate the primitive sense of ‘experimental’ with the more sophisticated one, in which actions with predictable outcomes are intentionally performed. This is why the claim that scientists are not making or trying to make art sounds sensible, whereas the claim that artists are not making or trying to make art sounds paradoxical. But it is not paradoxical at all. It is the awful truth. Artists are making or trying to make *works of art*, and if they do not know how to do this there are plenty of people in the present audience who can show them what to do.

Conclusion

It should be plain from this analysis that the makers of works of art do not engage with science and technology under any logical constraint. Forty or fifty years ago I, like many others, was seduced by the idea that serious artists *must* engage with the domains of science and technology. Why? Because this is where our emergent understanding of how it is possible to act in the real world in regularly purposeful ways most dramatically unfolds. But this is really only an adventitious constraint upon the artist. It was felt because cultural changes driven by memetic innovation did seem, as a matter of fact, to be occurring more rapidly and more abundantly in science than in any of the adjacent cultural domains of morality or political ideology or grocery retailing.

Two final points therefore seem to be worth making, or re-stating. The first is that the expression ‘experimental art’ does not describe a distinctive sort of art, contrasting with other sorts of art. In the relevant sense of ‘experimental’ (and using the relevant word ‘art’) there is no other sort of art.

(It may be worth remarking incidentally that—in a different way, because it is not a tautology but a catachresis—the expression ‘Australian art’ does not describe a distinctive sort of art to contrast with other sorts of art. My complaint about ‘art historians’ is that they regularly conflate the expression ‘Australian art,’ which is senseless, with expression ‘Australian *works of art*’ that is a viable descriptive term. Australian works of art *do* come in various kinds, each kind with its own evolutionary history).

The second point is this. It is a corollary of the fact that the expression ‘experimental *works of art*’ is not a tautology but a viable description, that many works of art are *not* experimental works of art. So how might we set about making an experimental work of art? Forty years ago, submitting any object or process with a strong scientific or technological flavour to the artworld for endorsement was enough to make it experimental. Rejection was very much on the cards. ‘This sort of thing is not even *bad* art,’ the pundits would say, ‘It is not art at all’. (I refer, of course, to those mystical aestheticians who have not yet come to terms with the fact that the word spelled ‘a-r-t’ is a homonym).

In any case, it is now clear that an engagement with science and technology is no longer outrageous, even to the aesthetes. The artworld has capitulated. There is by now nothing whatsoever from which it can withhold its endorsement without attracting derision. (Whoever seeks evidence of this need only look around).

So the problem for experimental artists has been radically revised. They cannot make experimental *art* for the very best of reasons. It is not possible to do what can't be done. Nor can they make experimental *works of art* because the artworld has substantially lost the power of rejection that it wielded so magisterially when Joseph Duveen and Bernard Berenson ran the operation.

What then is left? The relatively easy bit is making works of art. The more difficult bit is to do what everyone should do. We can all open up our minds to the astonishment of discovering new capacities for action in any domain of cultural production that we did not know we had, until somebody or something unexpectedly showed us how. Aha!

1 See, for example:

‘Art history?’ *History and Theory* 43 (February 2004): 1-17.

‘If Art has no history, what implications flow for the art museum?’ *Rethinking History* 9 (1, 2005):71-90.

‘For art, against aesthetics,’ in Ian North, Ed., *Visual Animals: crossovers, evolution and new aesthetics*. Contemporary Arts Centre of South Australia, Adelaide. 2007. 84-90.

The awful truth about what art is. Artlink, Adelaide, 2008.

‘Muffled sounds: the eartrumpet of the artworld has been struck by lightning.’ *Artlink* 30 (2, 2010): 34-36.

2 Monroe C. Beardsley’s *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (1958) is still an influential text. The criticism he analyses is, of course, *art* criticism.

3 I refer to classic formulations such as those of George Dickie and Arthur Danto. Continental European equivalents emerged in various ‘structuralist’ and other formulations of so-called ‘French theory’.

4 A recent change of name from the *Experimental Art Foundation* to the *Australian Experimental Art Foundation* in Adelaide reveals the insidious power of identity politics. The name *National Institute for Experimental Arts* adopted in Sydney is much less compromising.

5 The story that elaborates what Daniel Dennett called the best idea that anybody ever had.

6 Biological kinds have complex taxonomies (e.g. kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus and species, according to Linnaeus), all of them compressed into ‘species’ in general accounts of evolutionary theory. We do not yet have any comparably useful taxonomy of cultural kinds.