

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CANONIZATION AND VALUE

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My point in this essay will be to argue the following position: that the Test of Time, as the recognized arbiter of canonization,¹ specifically of the canonization of works of art, is only *symptomatic* of the presence of some (artistic) value.² An object's move from Canon-candidacy to being a member of the Canon is not fully analyzed through the Test of Time only. A complete treatment of how an object becomes a member of the Canon essentially will include discussion of that object's value. What is insufficient is an account wherein the value is merely inferred on the basis of that object's successfully making it into the Canon after a suitable amount of time has passed (through which, I might add for the sake of precision, the object continued to inspire deep attention and appreciation on the part of art commentators and experiencers). Furthermore, there is the pragmatic difficulty of being unable, with our only tool being the Test of Time, to know which art objects *recently* produced have high value and which not. While I will not pretend to offer herein a complete theory of art value, and how objects may be known to possess (intrinsically or instrumentally) this value, I will argue that we must con-

¹ David Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays* (Library of Liberal Arts, Bobbs-Merrill, 1965); Anthony Savile, *The Test of Time* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982); Anita Silvers, "The Story of Art Is the Test of Time," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 49:3 (Summer 1991), pp. 211–224.

² Members of canons are members due to their having some value. This is about as complete an account as can be offered. To say much more, such as they have "enduring" or "lasting" value is to either beg the question against a non-Test-of-Time account or to trivialize the Test of Time. It is this possession of value, and the nature of that value, that is of most interest to me in determining membership in a canon. (I will, later in the paper, discuss the value's locus.)

tinue to seek after such an account. I will argue this position through (i) an analogy with the problem of defining 'art' or 'artwork', a problem flowering in the twentieth century, and (ii) an analogy with a causal account of knowledge, as described by Alvin Goldman and others.

The Problem of Defining 'Art'

Given the upheavals we have experienced in twentieth century art production and art description, we find in the artworld one of the clearest cases of canon-building and canon-discussion. Since the academy has all but abandoned the search for a single, "essential" *objective* definition of what it is to be an artwork, we have resorted to building a system wherein our strongest intuitions about which objects truly are canonical artworks serves as a foundation—a foundation against which other objects can be tested to see if they are (i) canonical artworks, too, or (ii) artworks (*simpliciter*).³ The Canon consists of a subset of the set of all artworks. Works in the Canon "possess artistic value of a higher than average sort," or have "the ability to inspire enduring aesthetic admiration."⁴ This is the case whatever ontological story we tell about the object's value, whether the art object possesses intrinsic or instrumental value (insofar as it persistently rewards attention).⁵

³ This occurs most clearly in the institutional move in definitions of 'art', with the work of Danto, Dickie and others [Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *Journal of Philosophy* 61:19 (1964), pp. 571–584, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981); George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), *The Art Circle* (New York: 1984); Anita Silvers, "Once Upon A Time In The Artworld," in Dickie (*et al.*), *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, Second Edition (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), pp. 183–195]. The chief difference between antiessentialism and "institutionalism" is not that the latter offers an essential definition and the former does not; the chief difference is that the latter offers a definition of 'art' while the former offers only a *strategy* for offering such a definition.

⁴ Silvers, p. 211. The term "enduring" here must be of less importance to the formula than the phrase "has the ability." My point is not an ontological one about the locus of the value; my point is that the focus must be on the value, and not on the endurance of that value (for the reason I mentioned in the previous footnote).

⁵ There are two senses of value here. The first is artistic value, which would include not only the aesthetic value of the work but also the social, historical and perhaps moral or religious values that are commonly attributed to artworks. The second sense of value is the value that an object has simply in virtue of its being an art object and not a non-art object. Canon-members presumably have both of these sorts of value, but their claim to canonicity is grounded on their possessing the first sort of value, artistic value.

The difficulty that, I believe, ultimately led to canon theories was the disillusionment of individuals searching for a single, essential definition of what it is to be an artwork. Theorists then began to attack the need for such a definition; this is described in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Morris Weitz, Paul Ziff, and Maurice Mandelbaum.⁶ The problem was that, in part, the nature of art was changing so quickly throughout the course of the twentieth century, that the offering of a single essence shared by all artworks became a task too difficult to tackle with any hope of serious success. We acquiesced to a more comfortable position, a position of offering a double sided statement regarding what makes a given artwork an artwork. The first side of the statement was negative: there is no single essence shared by all artworks (following from that trivially that one cannot be articulated). The other side of the statement was positive. The positive half was necessary to insure that we had something at all philosophical to say regarding artworks. The view that there is no boundary to what makes an artwork an artwork leads immediately to radical relativism and the position that 'art is whatever I say it is'. This position is at best an uncomfortable one, at worst remarkably false.⁷

The positive half of the statement, though, seemed to take one of two forms. Either (1) art is an evolving concept, and while we may be able to say at any given moment what has been the nature of art (using whatever disjuncts and becoming as plural as needs be), we are unable to say what *will* be the nature of art. Art is an open concept. Or (2) art is a static concept, but one which cannot be captured in a single definition. So the move is to express the nature of art through a series of disjuncts: "art is a or b or c ..." Further, we admit that this series of disjuncts might grow to be indeed quite lengthy (although, to separate it from its "open" counterpart, will be describable in a finite offering of disjuncts). While these positive statements are of great importance to any antiessentialist take on art, their true value consists of being sign-posts to still further work. They function as "meta-aesthetical," only relating to us the possi-

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: MacMillan, 1973), especially pages 30–37; Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 14:2 (1956), pp. 27–35, *The Opening Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); Paul Ziff, *Antiaesthetics* (Dordrecht, 1984); Maurice Mandelbaum, "Family Resemblances and Generalization Concerning the Arts," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2:3 (1965), pp. 219–228.

⁷ Fenner, "Why Define 'Art?'" *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, forthcoming.

ble nature of *definitions* of art, not of art itself. What needs to be done is to fill out each of the disjuncts, to articulate the content of each. This would be a true expression of the nature of art, even on antiessentialist grounds, and even if the promise is that the disjuncts thus far articulated would continue to evolve or that more would be added. Further, these disjuncts might be expressed in philosophical terms or in (empirical) historical, sociological or psychological terms. This is less important than that there are disjuncts to be articulated. Antiessentialism does not hold of course that articulation of the nature of art is impossible; it holds only that that articulation must be *plural* and perhaps readily mutable. Articulation of disjuncts is still possible, and, I contend, still quite necessary if we mean to avoid the danger of having art be 'whatever we say it is'.

The antiessentialist take on 'art' is analogous to the Test of Time take on establishing canonical art. The Test of Time functions at a meta-level, highlighting (eventually) the presence of a high calibre of artistic value in the object under consideration. The Test of Time *per se* does not specify the kind, location or depth of artistic value in the object. The antiessentialist's take does not specify the various natures of art, it only discusses the strategy for offering definitions. Neither of these moves specifically offers us answers about 'art' or 'canonicity', they offer us only strategies and symptoms of these things. More work is needed.

The Canon and the Test of Time

The Canon of Western Art (whatever we may think of its nature or creation) exists and is, at least to some useful degree, specifiable. We can even offer an apparently proper account of how works are brought into the Canon —the Test of Time— and how works are excluded from it —same Test. What is offered are (i) the set of works of the Canon, (ii) the way they got to be works of the Canon, and (iii) the way in which other works may become members of the Canon. But this is not a full story.

While we may describe in some detail a club's membership, how those in the club got in, and how another might get in, we have yet to talk about (1) the actual club rules on membership, and (2) whether those rules are appropriate or not. The second question, albeit interesting, is not my concern here. The first question, however, is key. I understand that to join this club —a country club, say— I must fill out the application, must pay my application fees, and must wait for the decision of the committee. But nowhere am I told what exactly it is that the

committee is looking for. Nowhere am I told the criteria that the membership committee will bring to bear on my application. And so I am ill prepared to present myself a candidate for admission to this country club. Decisions are made, and I know *that* they are made and *who* is making them, but I have yet to learn *how* they are made.

This is analogous to the problem with a Test-of-Time system of incorporating works into the Canon. And there are pragmatic difficulties with such a system. How do I as a curator of the Museum of Modern Art, say on a trip down into Soho, decide which works to elevate to MOMA status and which to pass over? I do not have the luxury of waiting until the Test of Time weeds out from the Soho galleries just those works that are "enduring" enough (which have the requisite artistic value) to be properly displayed in such a prominent place as MOMA.

While the MOMA curators, and many others who judge such things in the Artworld, may be able to articulate a criteria of choosing which Canon-candidates are accepted and which rejected, there is still in the exploration of artwork canonization the lingering notion that the connection between the truth that something is Canon-material and the recognition of that fact is somehow too mysterious to articulate. What is provided thus far is a discussion of *agency* (an institution, a tradition, an Artworld), a discussion of *subject* (artworks properly members of the Canon *or* properly related in some way to the Canon), and an account of *process* (of how they became Canon members). This would be a complete account, were it not for the difficulty posed in the problem of the status of recent Canon-candidates. One of two things seems the case: (i) the Test of Time is indeed a complete account of the process by which objects (and events) properly become part of the Canon. If this is the case, then we are unable to specify which if any of any current Canon-candidates will be indeed members of the Canon. We cannot, then, in aesthetic discourse, refer to items created recently given that their status is in limbo —so how do we judge them good enough to place in museums, hang in galleries, and command high prices? We can speculate, but that is all. And if we attempt to justify our speculations, we would be involved in just the program I am recommending (or recommending returning to). This would suggest, as I have mentioned, a need for greater specification regarding the process by which these objects are tapped in or left out.

(ii) However, it could be that the Test of Time is meant only to be symptomatic of a deeper truth: whether or not the object or event in

question indeed possesses true artistic value. Here it is obvious that the key is the actual presence of value. This is the case no matter the metaphysical locus of that value, be it objective, subjective, or relational. Since the key is the presence of value, then the Test of Time functions only as a symptom of the presence of this value. We might presume that there are still other symptoms. And we might presume that there exists some account—again, as broad, as plural, as mutable as need be—that specifies what it is for the item to possess the value in question. A given object, say we agree, has value; now the question is, How do we know?

A Causal Analysis

How do we know, at heart, whether any given object indeed possesses the value the Test of Time shows it to? The question is not ontological. The Test of Time, let us stipulate, will eventually provide us with a certain degree of proof that the object possesses this value, that degree dependent on our temporal remove from the item and on the attention that item has sustained throughout that time. But if the Test of Time is incomplete or merely symptomatic, then some account of the value in question is still eluding us—or, more properly, some account of how we recognize, or access, the value in question is still missing.

Consider Alvin Goldman's questioning (among other things) the necessity of the justification condition in the traditional, i.e. platonic, analysis of knowledge: justified true belief.⁸ In connection with his attack, the story is told about an individual whose job it is to "sex chickens," to determine which are the female chicks and which the male (with the result that the females would continue their lives and the males would not). This individual is quite good at her job, enjoying a very high success rate. However, much as she tries, she cannot articulate a reason, or an explanatory cause, for why she is able to perform her job so well. There is no physical attribute of the chicks that she identifies that explains her ability to choose.

⁸ "A Causal Theory of Knowing," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXIV:12 (June 1967), pp. 357–372. This article is complemented with Goldman's "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXXIII:20 (November 1976), pp. 771–791, where Goldman revises his original take on platonic or cartesian justification as unnecessary for knowledge. For my purposes, the original article suffices. (Also interesting for my purposes is L.S. Carrier's "A Causal Theory of Knowledge," *Philosophia* 6 (1976).

Whenever I present this story to students, they invariably proclaim: "but there must have been something she was picking up on, some characteristic of the chicks, that allowed her to choose; she couldn't just have been that lucky." The students then are relieved to learn that the lack of articulated justification —the point Goldman made in his 1967 article— did not entail a lack of any connection between the truth of the proposition —that *this* chick is male— and the recognition by the chicken-sexer of that fact. Indeed, Goldman's analysis of knowledge focuses on that very thing, the connection —the *causal* connection— between the fact and the belief.

Canons are like chicken-sexes. It would seem that we cannot articulate a single criterion, or a single set of criteria, that demonstrate what all Canonical items have in common, apart from saying that the Test of Time shows, to whatever degree is appropriate or necessary, that these objects have "the ability to inspire enduring aesthetic admiration." As in the case of the chicken-sexer, what is missing is the articulation of that commonality, or set of commonalities, not the commonality itself. The trick now is to specify the nature and locus of the artistic value we believe all these objects to possess.

The Test of Time illuminates the fact that the object in question has the requisite value for being a member of the Canon. Time *per se* is not the cause of an object's being canonized. Nobody ever said so. It is a symptom of the worth that actually grounds the canonicity of the object. While the Test is illuminating, it behooves us to continue the quest for the cause of an object's being canonized, if only on the grounds that other items, candidates for inclusion in the Canon, are continually forthcoming, and without an articulation of the commonality, the best we can do for Canon-candidates is to say 'wait and see'. Meanwhile we still ponder over what exactly should be hung in the Museum of Modern Art —and whether (say) Goldman, along with Carnap and Quine, will make it into the Canon of Western Philosophy. We must decide which of *today's* candidates will be tapped in and which kept out, incidentally a prediction of what will and what will not be of lasting value, but essentially being an articulation of the value of the object itself.

This is the case whether or not the status or value of the object is mutable. Revisionist theories hold that some events occurring after the creation of the artwork may change its status. Attempting the development of an account of the artistic value that Canonical objects have does not preclude or ignore revisionism. My point is that however mutable the

value or status of the object at hand, we still ought —here and now— to determine its value. To do otherwise, to take a wait-and-see attitude, is too strongly analogous to the attitude that we ought not do philosophy of science because theories of physical mechanics are constantly being altered, and in the history of science some have been given up for others. To take a wait-and-see attitude here is to not do philosophy of science. To take a wait-and-see posture about the worth of an artwork — about its bid for admission into the Canon— is to relinquish discussion of the value of artworks, in particular, recent artworks. Let the status of an artwork be evolutionary or revisable; this does not stand as a reason for rejecting exploration of that's object *current* value. And perhaps on description of its current value we can resolve the pragmatic difficulties encountered with a wait-and-see Test-of-Time posture regarding the worth of art objects.

Causal theories of knowledge mirror our predicament. There is no articulation of the justification for the connection between the truth of some contention and the contention itself. But there is still something that causally accounts for the connection. In simple causal models, the truth of the proposition enters into our believing that proposition in order for us to be able to properly say that the proposition is true, that we *know* the proposition. If this is the case, then the epistemological model of our knowing that a thing is artistically meritorious will consist primarily in trying to determine, to use the analogy again, what it is that allows the chicken-sexer to know that the chick at hand is female. There is something that accounts for the chicken-sexer knowing. The factors that account for how the chicken-sexer knows that the chick at hand is male may be complex, perhaps involving a variety of odd disjuncts. But if we are truly trying to understand what it is that accounts for the chicken-sexer's knowledge, then we should take the time, and engage in the study, to determine this.

The fact that 'art' is mutable, if it is, does not stand as a reason for not proceeding with the task of analysis. Rather, this merely suggests that the process of analysis will continue on for as long as new art is brought up for candidacy in the Canon —or new philosophic works are brought up for inclusion in the Canon of Western Philosophy, etc. Just because the task is difficult, complex and complicated, and may necessitate our getting our hands rather dirty, is no reason to settle for discovery of a single symptom, a single *indicator*, of the value. We ought view it as a challenge, and perhaps together with art historians, etc., we should begin to

look for what makes a given artwork properly part of the Canon. If I asked a traditionalist why the Canon of Western Philosophy contains the works it does,⁹ she would most probably articulate some objective criteria of value, to which all of the works in the Canon participate. The same should be true of art, regardless of its possible evolutionary nature. We can begin the work to build an account of why the Test of Time works to establish some artworks properly in the Canon of Western Art.

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⁹ John Searle recently addressed this in his "Is There a Crisis in American Higher Education?" in the *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, XLVI:4 (January 1993), pp. 24–47.