Evaluating Art.
Art, its Categories and the Normativity of Evaluation

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Properties and responses

• You fear the car driving towards you
• “Watch out! A dangerous car!”

Properties and responses

• You fear the car driving towards you
• “Watch out! A dangerous car!”
• But its speed is 3 km/hr
• Hume would say: there is no disputing your fear: you either have it or you don’t!
• This is how we think about taste. But is it right?

Properties and responses

• In practice, we discuss:
  – The property of the car
  – The appropriateness of your response: you are overreacting

• We can discuss the value of art works:
  – its properties and our responses to these
  – Personal responses need not be idiosyncratic

Our example for today

• Tomorrow, Sunday, at noon, Jim Koon will kill himself at the town square
  – Everyone is invited to watch him, through posters and announcements
  – Should he be subsidized?

Two things

• The pertinence of art-internal categories
• The crucial value that art has for culture
• A case-study: suicide art
Getting the Categories right

• Is it art?
• For that, it has to be in some art form

Getting the Categories right

• Is it art?
• Which art form?
  – Not literature, or painting, or sculpture
  – Ballet? Theatre?

Getting the Categories right

• Is it art?
• Which art form?
  – Not literature, or painting, or sculpture
  – Ballet? Theatre?
  – Performance? Installation?
  – Something new?

Getting the Categories right

• We decide on basis of how we think we should appreciate the "work"

• Distinction between art works and art forms
• A bad painting is an instance of the art form of painting
Why?

• We must get our categories right, for two reasons
  1. Without the right categories we cannot evaluate the work
  2. The categories inform us about how we deal with these works

• If Jim Koon’s suicide were theatre we would judge its narrative coherence and the emotional and cognitive effects of the playing
  • If it were a performance we would judge its power to thematise human vulnerability

A neutral example

• Imagine the art world of the 3-D Guernicas:
  • All works of art have the image of Picasso’s Guernica as their content, but differ in physical depth, in relief
  • Relief is where the work’s expressiveness and meaningfulness resides

• Picasso’s Guernica is flat and boring according to standards in that art world

1st conclusion

• You must know the categories under which to sort the work — but then the evaluation still has to begin
  • The categories will tell you what is standard or deviant or even counter-standard
  • But maybe Jim Koon’s suicide is a new art form? How to decide?

• Should we look at the beauty of his dropping to the floor
  • The speed of his dying — the slower he dies the better??
  • What would the next work in this art form be like?
Something is wrong here

• But what is it?

Something is wrong here

• We do not want this to be art. Why?

Something is wrong here

• We do not want this to be art
• No audience is allowed to look at a suicide as if it were art
• We are held to interfere
• On moral grounds
• We are prohibited, in this case, to take up an artistic attitude

Back to 1st question: is it art?

• With works of art an audience takes up an artistic attitude
• We refrain from moral interference, we let things go their own way, as if they are represented, not really there
• In some cases morality prohibits

Jim Koon’s suicide cannot be an instance of an art form, because it cannot be art

3 Conclusions
1. Morality allows art practice
   • Why? Because art is crucial for culture
2. Within art practice categories form our rules to work with:
   • Art form specifications
   • Genre specifications
   • Style specifications
3. Art-internal normativity derives not from 2, but from 1 — we are morally motivated to make great art, but we evaluate through the categories
How to validate our values?

• We must dispute matters of taste [against relativism]
• Works must be of a certain kind, or we couldn’t make sense of them
• Works must be meritorious, must be good at what they do

Beyond the limits

• New things must gain momentum in this arena by setting up a new art form
• Works from other art practices must either bring along their categories (and convince this art world of their pertinence), or conform to “our” categories, (and risk being mis-apprehended)

• Art is not just an arena for fun; no mere place to flee our worries; no mere tear-jerking domain — its plays are serious
• Art practice requires that we suspend our moral agency, even in light of horrible (represented) events; it has to gain back our trust by artistic merit