

Doing Without Art

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In a talk I gave ten years ago, [‘What If There Were No Such Thing as the Aesthetic?’](#) I tried to show that, not only that there are no features that are unique to artworks, but also that there is no one single feature that all artworks possess. The upshot of this was that there was no determinate object, or range of objects for the intellectual pursuit known as aesthetics, at least in the terms of the common acceptance of that term, as having to do with the qualities that are specific to art, to concern itself with. This is not to say that there are no qualities that are specific to particular examples of the things we call arts – cinema, painting, ballet, poetry, folk-song. But none of these qualities are possessed by all of the arts. So there might still be plenty of gainful employment to be had in investigating the qualities and effects of the different kinds of objects that get loosely categorised as art, in all their huge abundance, but the claim I wanted then, and am prepared still, to defend was that there was exactly nothing about art qua art that was available for investigation.

My focus in that essay was on questions of category and definition, the question in short of whether the term ‘art’ defined anything other than a loose and improvised collection of different categories of representational (and non-representational) works, and therefore whether it was credible to attempt to distinguish specifically ‘aesthetic’ qualities or responses. I was and remain fully aware that the term ‘aesthetic’ does not refer simply to the nature and effects of works of art, since, for Kant, to give only this powerful example, the term aesthetic related to a particular kind of judgement, which might be brought to bear on many other kinds of object than works of art. But my argument against the existence of ‘the aesthetic’ seems to me to be even stronger the more diffuse and various the senses are of the term – and to speak of specific kinds of aesthetic response or judgement seems to me to be even more diffuse and various than speaking of the specific kinds of thing that artworks are held to be.

I am not entirely sure what I was expecting the global consequences of the news I broke about the non-existence of the aesthetic to be. But I have been

surprised by how little difference my arguments have made to anyone to whom I have outlined them. The rational and bien-pensant persons of which my social and intellectual circle is exclusively made up were polite and attentive but tended to the Lacanian attitude of *je sais mais quand-même*. The least surprising response was to assume that what I had to say might have some bearing on the philosophy of aesthetics, as though a demonstration of the nonexistence of gnomes and kobolds were to be taken as a seminal contribution to Fairy Studies. But the commonest response has been to suggest that, although, strictly speaking, yes, there were so many different things that 'the aesthetic' was said and thought to have to do with, and so many million incompatible things that had been affirmed and advanced in its name, that, for that reason alone, it was exceedingly unlikely that the voluntary curbs on talk of the aesthetic for which I was calling would take. Indeed, perhaps this would even be undesirable, since my own argument allowed it to be thought that sometimes when people spoke about the aesthetic they were really using it to talk about other good things, that they would no longer be able to talk about with such conviction if aesthetics talk were discouraged. These other good things might include, for example, the pleasure in order or pattern, the instinct for play, the narrative impulse, empathy and the imagining of other minds and experiences and the projection of other worlds or alternative words of arranging this one. So the argument was a little like the argument for banning alcohol. Sure, if inebriating liquors came onto the market for the first time now they would be very unlikely to be legalised, but to extirpate everything with which the consumption of alcohol was intertwined would be a barbarously killjoy measure. It even resembled the resistance to atheist arguments that one used to hear in the nineteenth century; of course there was no God, but to say that therefore no good could come from thinking there was a God would be downright demoralising.

So the question which has gathered for me in recent years has been, why, when it is seems so easy to show, and even to get people to agree, that there is nothing in the world to correspond to the aesthetic, large numbers of fair-minded, intellectually scrupulous and clear-thinking persons wanted to carry on operating within its terms. It must be a matter, I have come to think, not of what the aesthetic was, as of what it did. And what kind of pragmatist was I, if I deprived people of their innocent and self-deceiving approximations, and in the name of what absolute and invariant truth exactly?

I want to try here to lay out some of the consequences of abandoning the belief that the term 'art' names any kind of essential quality or even anything particularly distinctive. For the reluctance to abandon this belief arises from

something at once more diffuse and more powerful than questions of designation and demarcation. It arises from ideas about the powers and purposes of art, about what art is thought to be able to do, to and for us, rather than what it is thought to be.

Let me be clear. It's not that I think we could or should do without art exactly – abandon poetry-reading, gallery-going, opera-attendance, break-dancing or any of the delights of what Philip Larkin calls 'ruin-bibbing'. What I do however think we would be incalculably better off without is 'art' or Art - that is to say the idea or ideology of art, the set of more-or-less delirious beliefs that we hold or allow about the sorts of things that art is able to do simply by dint of being art, or any version of the thing we may severally or synchronously imagine 'art' to be.

Before I start considering, as caustically and corrosively as I can, some of the improbable and unproveable powers that are claimed for art, I should acknowledge that the question of definition cannot be entirely left behind in favour of a discussion of effects, so would like to allow myself to take one or two extra pops at the definition question.

Definitions of art and its effect are caught in a logical squeeze. Propositions about the nature or potential of art often take a form that implies strongly that all art is included in the definition. Thus 'art creates a space for critique'. Or 'art enlarges the imagination'. Or 'art can save us'. Or 'art resists commodification'. Or 'art asks questions without supplying answers'. Or 'art creates spaces of experiment or free speculation'. Or 'art adumbrates utopia'. Now there are distinct logical problems, to advert for the time being only to these, with this kind of all-inclusive statement. To start with, there is the notorious and widely-acknowledged multiplicity of candidate definitions. Does a universalising statement of this form mean that once a given object is defined, according to any scheme of definition, as an art object, or a given form of action is defined, again according to any scheme of definition, as art-making, it will inevitably and by that very token have the nature and effects specified in the said universalising statement, even if it is defined as some other kind of art or defined as art in some other kind of way? This seems implausible, precisely because there seem to be so many different ways in which something may qualify as art. Thus it is not hard to imagine art forms that can have critical, satirical or even downright subversive effects. But it would be an odd kind of monomania that assumed that all kinds of art – extending, for example, to miniature-painting, ballet and the singing of sea-shanties – would necessarily have such functions because they were all kinds of art.

But this is actually too exacting a way of stating the difficulty. For even if we assume, as we often can, a broad working consensus about many of the things that will qualify as forms of art, this turns out to be no help at all. For, even when there are works or actions that are without much serious demur accepted as kinds of art – I can readily concede that sonnets and symphonies and still-life paintings seem pretty much like artworks whichever way up you hold them – it is very difficult to imagine any claim for the purposes and powers of art of the kinds that I just enumerated that could really be held to apply to any and all examples even of the kind of art in question. That is, there will always be instances that, while indubitably qualifying as the denominated kind of art, nevertheless will not seem to bear out very plausibly the claims that, for example, art can save us. At this point, the smart thing (the only thing, really) for the proponent of the distinctive power of art to do is to acknowledge that it is in fact only the best examples of the art in question that have the designated powers and effects. But this presents another kind of logical difficulty. For now it seems that art is actually being defined in the first place as precisely and exclusively that thing that has the power or effect predicated of it, which of course renders the claim circular. Art can be assumed to have good effects as long as one makes certain that the art in question is of an exemplary kind, namely the kind that has the said good effects.

Thus most affirmations of the virtue or power of art are either greedily presumptuous, because they cannot possibly apply to all instances of what may be taken to be art, in different times, places and tempers, or they are meanly stipulative, and therefore exercises in circular reasoning.

So now, I want to ask and answer three questions. First, what do we do with art? Second, how can we do without art? And finally, without art, what kinds of things could we do?

What Do We Do With Art?

So why the resistance to doing without the idea of art? I think that the reason why art and its powers have been so variously described is that art has come to mean for us, singly and severally, what I want to call the Great Good Thing – the good thing that is good beyond all calculations of relative advantage and deficit. It is necessary for many to continue to be able to believe in the possibility of an impossible thing that is good beyond all possibilities of being or doing a particular kind of good. To be asked to do without art is less

threatening than to be asked to do without 'art', with the idea that there could be some kind of possibility of goodness in general and as such that lay behind and subtended every particular instance of something being locally good for something. 'Art' for many, is identified with the possibility of posing this kind of possibility, and its poverty of predication is the very means of ensuring its totipotency, its capacity to take on any form, like the stem cell.

It is really quite astonishing to reflect, in a world that is supposed to be ever more secular, ever more on its guard against mystifications, on the powers and capacities that are attributed to art and art works. As John Carey has observed in *What Good Are The Arts?* (2006) , these claims are very rarely subject to any kind of empirical testing, even when it might seem quite possible to do so. It is widely assumed that the experience of art makes us fully, richer, more responsive and responsible persons, or at least that the absence of it makes us duller, number and morally depleted. But we do not need to revert to the famous example of the concentration-camp commandant who is capable of relishing Mozart even while he slaughtered Jews to realise that there are as many cruel and boorish people among the aficionados of art as there are among other groups. Carey's survey, along with the fuming but largely ineffective responses which it provoked, devastatingly shows how little such claims for the power of art are able to survive dry-eyed, agnostic appraisal.

One very signal example of the desire to make art and the aesthetic the carrier of the Great Good Thing is the tendency to attribute to art the power to confront us with the indefinable, or with certain kinds of alterity or defiance of ways of knowing. The work of Emmanuel Levinas, who insisted that the other could never be simply or straightforwardly known or approached, or not without a kind of assimilative violence, which reduced the other's alterity to a version of me, is central here. The inconvenient fact, however, is that Levinas was deeply mistrustful of aesthetic forms, precisely because they reduced the other to images or representations, rather than allowing for the catastrophic and incomprehensible event of the other. This has proved to be no deterrent at all on those who would give art a special privilege in opening or preserving the mysterious, ineffable aperture on to the infinite that the other is. Of course, Levinas was as mistaken as those followers of his who refuse to follow him in his suspicion of the aesthetic, precisely because he ascribed a particular singular quality to the aesthetic.

These considerations are also given piquancy by recent developments in Continental philosophy, or the forms of it of which respectful notice is being taken in the Anglo-American academy. If the period or style of thought known

as postmodernism was characterised by a systematic suspicion of aesthetic ideology, guided by powerful critiques such as those of Benjamin, Bourdieu, de Man and Eagleton, the style of political philosophy of the generation that has defined itself against postmodernism, in the work of Žižek, Agamben, Rancière and Badiou, has been characterised by an astonishing willingness to reinstate the mystical authority and, even more implausibly, to proclaim the political promise of the aesthetic. Alain Badiou, for example, represents art as a kind of higher philosophy, as the formalisation of a truth beyond merely predicable truth. Art, he writes in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, is both immanent, in that 'Art is rigorously extensive with the truths that it generates', and absolutely singular, in that 'These truths are given nowhere else than in art' (Badiou 2005, 9). So '[w]hat art educates us for is therefore nothing apart from its own existence. The only question is that of encountering this existence, that is, of thinking through a form of thought [penser une pensée]' (Badiou 9). Here the gestures of simultaneously emptying art of all particular significance and saturating it with pregnancy and puissance are strongly in evidence. Perhaps a time will come in my life when it will seem like a good way of passing it to assemble a detailed critique of this claim, and I must admit I am tempted already. But, for the time being, and with any luck for ever and a day, I want merely to remind myself of the suggestions I have just made about the problems of defining what one means by art, and to say that I don't know how this statement is to be applied accurately or non-circularly to art as such, which is to say, to any and every instance of art, rather than to the *summa cum laude* examples of it. A maudlin poem in a school magazine is surely a kind of art, albeit perhaps not a very distinguished kind, but it is very unlikely indeed that it will bring forward any truths whatever that are given nowhere else than in it. No doubt, there are examples of art that do indeed seem to prompt or permit us to think through a thought in the way that Badiou stipulates, but these surely cannot furnish any reliable indications of what 'art' in general does - they would only be indications that, for Badiou, the only real art would be art that met this stiff qualifying condition, which makes his statement about art much narrower and less grandiose in application than it might otherwise seem.

Doing Without Art

What would it mean to do without art? Let us think for a little while about the 'without' in that phrase. This certainly skews the question rather, in the same way as calling oneself an 'atheist' has seemed to many atheists, like Daniel Dennett and Anthony Grayling, to concede a sort of priority to believers (who,

oddly, do not seem much in the habit of calling themselves 'theists'). It then makes the choice of not believing in God a kind of perverse twist on or abstention from a widespread and naturally-existing consensus, something that could never really become a majority position. Perhaps we might also compare doing without art to giving up smoking. Jean-Paul Sartre describes this process well. Giving up smoking is difficult, he says, because one is really giving up what seems to be the whole world, insofar as the whole world is suffused with and given definition by the experience and idea of smoking. '[E]very desire', Sartre tells us in his *Wartime Diaries*, 'is a desire to appropriate. And ... every appropriation is appropriation of the world through a particular object. Desire is so made that the desired object always appears to us the condition *sine qua non* that makes our being-in-the-world possible' (Sartre 1999, 259). When I give up the gaspers, it seems to me that I will also have to give up my way of writing, my way of eating and drinking, even, perhaps, my ways of making love, all of which are given their distinctive existential tone by the fact that I smoke before, during or shortly after them. I used to roll my own cigarettes (it was the only way I could afford to smoke as many as I did). For a long time after I gave up smoking, I would beg friends to let me roll their cigarettes, which I would then proceed to stockpile for them in unhelpfully industrial quantities, since what I lingeringly missed, more than the neurochemical hit, was the apparatus and the loving ritual of packing these little paper parcels full of hedonic promise. Actually, Sartre sees this toning of the world not so much as a positive overlay as what he calls a 'destructive appropriation', which is precisely why smoking in particular is so hard to do without: 'the act of destructively appropriating the tobacco was the symbolic equivalent of destructively appropriating the entire world' (Sartre 1984, 597). Successfully giving up anything requires one to move beyond the condition in which the relinquished object or experience hangs around in the form of an absence, a Gaulliose-shaped hole in the world, an art-shaped ache. As long as you are think of yourself as doing without something, you are obviously still holding on to it, or it on to you. Giving up, doing without and getting over mean breaking the link between the particular object in the world that one gives up and the whole world, by reducing the thing to an object in the world rather than a portal or perspective on it.

As Sartre reassures himself several years later:

In order to maintain my decision not to smoke, I had to realize a sort of decrystallization; that is, without exactly accounting for myself for what I was doing, I reduced the tobacco to being nothing but itself – an herb which burns. I cut its symbolic ties with the world; I persuaded myself that I was not taking anything

away from the play at the theater, from the landscape, from the book which I was reading, if I considered them without my pipe; that is, I rebuilt my possession of these objects in modes other than that sacrificial ceremony. (Sartre 1984, 597)

Of course, a worse example than Sartre for showing the usefulness of rational argument in giving up smoking can scarcely be imagined. Asked by a *Newsweek* reporter late in his life what was the most important thing in life to him, Sartre replied 'I don't know. Everything. Living. Smoking'. Later still, when confronted by a doctor with the choice of giving up smoking or the possible amputation of both his legs, Sartre replied that he'd have to think about it.

Doing without something like drink, religion or art, would mean that there was no longer any without about it. One would have relinquished not only the thing itself, but also the relinquishing of it. This sounds like a harder thing to do than it is. But there is no way to resolve to do it, or no thoroughly resolute way. It is one of those things like going to sleep, for which only a certain amount of planning is possible and for which the steely exercise of will is close to useless. As soon as get it into your head that you have to superintend the whole process of losing consciousness from beginning to end, it becomes impossible to do it, since, though consciousness can arrange for its own abeyance, it cannot be it. What you have to do is of course precisely not to think about doing without art, otherwise the lingering art-ache will be like Lacan's castration complex, of which Derrida remarks that 'quelque-chose manque à sa place, mais le manque n'y manque jamais' – 'something is missing from its place, but the lack is never missing from it' (Derrida 1987, 441). The trick, no trick really, is precisely to start doing other things instead, to find other forms of destructive appropriation, which will enable other kinds of world-making, the making of other kinds of world.

This is the reason why I have myself, apart from the occasional tumble off the wagon like this one, almost wholly kicked the habit of critique, on the Freudian grounds that nobody ever voluntarily gives up a pleasure. The best you can hope to achieve with knocking copy about a particular belief or argument is to shame people into not openly acknowledging or articulating it. If you want them actually to stop thinking in a certain way, the very worst thing to do is to risk using the work of critique to goad them into constructing even more spurious defences of their imperious pleasures. Rather than telling people to ensure that they do not hit across the line of the ball, or to remember not to find it interesting to wonder what might be the essential spiritual characteristics of red-haired people, Frenchmen or women, you should try, mostly through

seductive mimesis, to induce in them other sets of habits or practices that are more rewarding and make other people admire and approve them more than the deprecated habits and practices. In short, doing without art means getting interested in doing other things instead.

So what would it be like to do without art? In one sense, I want to say that the virtue of doing so is that hardly anything would need to change. I hope this is not too much of a damp squib. My promise is that, once we had learnt to do without art, or unpicked ourselves from the conviction that we would not be able to do without it, we could and undoubtedly would carry on being amazed, arrested, intrigued, entertained, perplexed, provoked, soothed, enlarged, enlivened, instructed, you get the point, and all the other things that art is held uniquely or in an exemplary way to do for us - only by different objects, or by the same objects differently construed, for we would now be acknowledging that our responses were local and contingent effects of the particular features of particular kinds of arts, as well as other kinds of things besides.

Interlude: Taking Exception

However, not everything could survive intact, for there is one category of response that would come to seem futile or unintelligible. This would be the kind of response that requires us to be abstractly aware that we are responding to something that is art. The experience here is typically and, according to my argument, necessarily a negative rather than a positive one, that is, the experience of suspending one's responses, or cautiously putting them in brackets. Since there is no particular kind of thing that art is, there is no particular positive kind of way to respond to it. So the only way to respond to something as a work of art is to try to keep in mind that fact; that, as a work of art, it is in some obscure way not, or not only, the things it might otherwise seem to be (a picture of a dog, a story, a tune). So, funnily enough, you could say that doing without, that is to say, relinquishment, abstention or subtraction, is the mode in which many people experience response to art, or feel they should try to. Take the experience of looking with pleasure at a beautiful and well-kept garden. There can be little doubt that there is both industry and artistry involved in the creation of a garden, as we might be reminded by the joke about the vicar who greets a local gardener with the words 'How magnificent your garden is looking, Ted! You and the good Lord have done wonderful things with it', to which Ted growls 'That's as may be, but you should have seen it when the good Lord had it to himself'. Now imagine that a third person

remarks to me that Ted is not merely a gardener, but a horticultural artist. There are two ways of taking such a claim. One is to take the term in a loosely honorific sense, as an indication merely of a very highly-developed kind of expertise – that Ted, he’s an absolute genius with geraniums. The other is to take it as an invitation to view the garden as something more or different from a mere (!) garden, to put in brackets all the usual responses that one might bring to bear to looking at a garden, and all the conventional kinds of gratification and pleasure it might seem to offer. As the work of an ‘artist’, the garden could never be just a garden, it would have to be a garden in the service of art. The something more that art is, in the case of Duchamp’s Fountain, for example, involves a great deal of ontological diminution. What art adds to things is their lessening, an hypothecated departing from their natural or apparent conditions, the fading down of their *haecceitas* (the precise opposite of what the Thomist Stephen Dedalus proposes in the aesthetic theory he articulates in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.)

I always find it rather odd that so many people should be so willing to designate themselves as artists, or be so sure that they are. For, in one sense, this is the most embarrassingly immodest of claims. When somebody lays claim to the status of artist, I feel as I do when I read one of those notices that are headed ‘Polite Notice’. ‘Listen’, I want to say, ‘whether your notice is polite or not is not for you to decide, and, to be frank, your chances of persuading me that it is are very considerably diminished by your pushy preemption of my judgement in the matter.’ I am amazed by how often artists will preface a statement of views or an account of experiences with the phrase ‘as an artist’. What is amazing is not only their presumption (how can they be so sure?), but also their assumption that I will know what they mean by the phrase – that I will accede to the implicit suggestion that artists have a particular set of responses to things.

I have a lingering affection for the tacky working-men’s club word ‘artiste’, and wish that it were possible to use it in place of ‘artist’ on many occasions. The word ‘artiste’ agreeably evokes bow-ties and spangled tights. The kinds of people who get called ‘artistes’ are jugglers, funambulists, conjurors, tapdancers, ventriloquists, poodle-trainers and crooners, all of them people who can do, perhaps not surpassingly, but still surprisingly well what I can only do ill, or not at all. What I like about the word is the vulgarity and bathos it acquires from the Frenchified absurdity of its presumption. I would like, whenever I hear somebody qualify their practice or world view as that of ‘an artist’, to be able to reply ‘yes, but are you an artiste?’

But, in another sense, somebody who says that they are an artist is saying nothing at all about the quality of whatever it is they do as an artist. They are saying that they do things that are supposed to be regarded as no longer quite what they were as a result of being done as art, or done by an artist. An artist in this Pickwickian sense lays claim to being a sort of ontological engineer, specialised in putting spanners in the works of our apprehension of the way things are.

This is perhaps at once the strongest and the weakest claims of art and its associated magic word, 'artist'. Art is work that aims or demands to be treated as 'art', that is to say, as no longer just what it is. Artists are persons who are credited, or permitted to credit themselves, with the power to get things to be treated as art. Now, my inclination when faced with this is to view it as empty self-aggrandising tautology. But there is a more substantial way of taking this claim that art is simply something that we can be persuaded to view as art. This is the argument that art creates specialness, in the form of exception or suspension of normal meanings. It is the view that something is art when we remove it from its normal contexts of understanding, or subtract from it its normal ways of being understood. The gain is usually supposed to be some kind or other of enlargement of perspective, a gain, that is, in cognitive flexibility. Defined in this way, art would function very much like humour, in that humour too seems to yoke together things and nothings, or things and not-things. So it should not be surprising that art has come to be identified so strongly with various kinds of practical joke and artists and pranksters have come closer together.

This argument seems to me to be close to an argument mounted by Ellen Dissanayake (1988, 1992), that art is an expression of the human propensity and need to set things apart, to create forms of second life, of suspended meaning, of things that are not quite themselves, of sanctity and sacredness. Art, on this account, would simply be the special, or, what comes to the same thing, the power ascribed to art of letting us, having us, view things as special, or even just being willing to accept that they might come to be so regarded. When I considered Dissanayake's argument in my earlier essay 'What If There Were No Such Thing as the Aesthetic?', I suggested that what was wrong with it was not the argument about the human habit of setting things apart, but the privative identification of this power or predilection with art. There are indeed lots of ways in which, individually and collectively, human beings like to set things apart as special – in sentimental attachments, in sexual fetishism, in Husserlian epoché. But there is, I said then, no special way of making things

special, no way of ways, no exceptionless method for creating states of exception.

I am inclined now to allow a little more leeway to the argument that we may have developed the habit of using the word 'art' in cases where such a suspension of the normal course of things is intended. It seems to me that this effect, of inducing what might be called empty parenthesis, is logically the only effect that can really, reliably be ascribed to art qua art, and precisely because the term art is so virgin of predication. In fact, if I am right, and there are no qualities or effects that are intrinsic to all the things that can conceivably be called artworks, then there could logically only be one exception to this, namely that provisional preparedness to suspend judgement or expectation that I have said is evoked by calling something art (though this is, of course, quite a historically contingent way of thinking about what art is or does).

We should also notice that, in performing this function of bracketing, art becomes self-referential in precisely the same way as magic. That is, just as magical thinking is the name for the kind of thinking that permits the thought that just thinking things would make them happen, so art is the licence given to the idea that one could set the world apart from itself simply by regarding it as art. Art is the name for the belief that just by calling something art one can change its nature: this is and is not art. Perhaps we can never entirely do without magical thinking, since thinking is so self-evidently magical. One can indeed make things happen just by thinking them – you can make yourself believe in magic, for instance, and, while I do not believe in magic, I have a positively superstitious dread of the powers of magical thinking, to which I fear succumbing and against which I nervously deploy numberless forms of apotropaism. Indeed, in so far as I view the belief in the powers of art as a species of magical thinking, I have myself to acknowledge that if art does not really exist, then art-thinking palpably and assuredly does and, like magical thinking, certainly does have substantial and real-world effects. These effects might be the reason why we might want to see what we could do without entirely relying on it.

But, if Ellen Dessanayake is right, then there is, after all, a single, essential feature of art, that allows us to posit for it a particular and necessary power. Like magic, as in the operations of the placebo, 'art' would stand for the very belief in the power of art. I have to acknowledge that, if this is really the power of art, a power that depends upon 'art' precisely being empty and without consistent predicates, then we might well be a little worse off and not better off doing without it. There might well, that is, be something that we would no

longer be able to count on, in the same way, perhaps, as if we forgot or abandoned the use of algebra and no longer had the capacity to manipulate the emptily indeterminate x and y .

But I still want to say that, in the absence of art, or following the waning of the belief in art's special power to create specialness, what we would no longer be able to count on would be the faith, or the fear, that there was only one such mode of setting things eccentrically aside from themselves, without which the world would be condemned to a dreary, serial self-similitude. What I take from the argument about art's capacity to confer specialness is what it may intimate of the many other ways we have, and have yet to invent, for othering things from, or into themselves. And in fact, the worst thing about giving art this unique privilege of creating specialness is precisely that it seems to encourage or even require us to reduce everything that is not art to featureless clinker.

Still, viewing things as not really, or not absolutely themselves, is, I have to admit, under certain circumstances an intriguing thing, and it may well be that the ideology of art that currently prevails in so many quarters is quite good at inducing such a state of partial or putative ontological suspension, or convincing us that it ought to be possible. The problem for me is that, in nearly all cases, I continue to find the ways in which things are what they are much more engaging and enlarging than the possibility that they might also be viewed as, in a certain sense, also not what they are. It's partly because the older I get, the more interested I become in what things are, about which it increasingly appears I know hardly anything, rather than in the tired epistemological tricks I can pull on them, which I have been watching myself perform for years. It's mostly a mathematical matter, like pretty much everything else. Though it undoubtedly adds something to an object for it to be thought of as an art object, defined in the sense I am currently entertaining, namely as somewhat less or other than the thing it would otherwise be taken to be, it adds only one thing, a certain all-purpose *ceci-n'est-pas-une-pipe* not-ness, and always, rather wearisomely, I'm afraid, the same thing. And the one way, the repeated way, the art way, in which things are put to the side of, or minimally substracted from themselves when they are art is a very spindly kind of thing compared with the ways in which things are what they are. Artists and their retainers like to say that art adds something to the mere givenness of the world and therefore helps things to be more than mere things, but I can make no sense of the idea of the world as 'merely' given. The ways in which things are what they are are much more hugely multifarious and, of course, as modes of perception and interpretation ramify, capable of almost infinite expansion, than the ways in which art is capable of suspending this givenness. So: I grant the power of art,

as commonly and currently construed, to except things from themselves, or to encourage us to believe (perhaps magically) that this can be done (by art). But I just don't find this power as interesting or abounding in possibility as it is thought to be. Ontology outdoes nontology by a factor of millions to one.

What to Do Without Art

Let me conclude by stating baldly what the advantages might be of living in a world in which the notion of art had lost all its mystical and wish-fulfilling accretions and had dwindled back into the poor-but-honest condition of naming something brought about through the exercise of art or skill. There seem to me really to be three.

The first is that we might be able to pay more discriminating attention to the various constituent powers, qualities and effects that are characteristic of the different arts – narrative, imitation, organisation, and so on. Here we might be cheered by Vernon Lee's grown-up remark that she hoped to 'obtain from art all that it can give, by refraining from asking it to give what it cannot' (Lee 1883, 13). The second is that we might be able to pay more rewarding attention to the kinds of artifice and artistry in actions and practices that are not recognised as, or only intermittently allowed to be, arts. The third is that we might be able to make out more clearly and subject to informed and informative analysis the many blunders, illusions, sleights of hand and wish-fulfillments that have constituted the long history of belief in the powers of art – along the lines of post-religious examinations of religious thinking.

Given what I said earlier about trying not only to do without art, but also to do without the sweet, swelling pathos of doing without it, it would be agreeable if this were to result, not in a permanent vigilance, or hermeneutics of suspicion, in which we kept the superstitious denunciation of art and the aesthetic stoked up into incandescence, but rather a hermeneutics of permission, in which things were allowed to be, and become, as interesting as we could make them.

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