

A Note on Denis Dutton's Concept of Art

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In *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*, Denis Dutton articulates a cluster criteria concept of art that is comprised of twelve parts. His approach is rooted in evolutionary aesthetics and focuses on the idea that, in cross-cultural terms, the concept of art is best understood at the 'conceptual center' of standard or paradigmatic cases of art. Art is ill-defined, he claims, by paying too much attention to 'outlying' examples, such as Duchamp's readymades, Sherrie Levine's photographs, and John Cage's *4'33"*. Dutton's central theme is that thousands of generations of evolution in the Pleistocene period created an art instinct in *Homo sapiens* that gradually culminated in the predominance of these twelve definitional criteria of art by way of sexual selection. That is, each criterion had survival value in terms of skill displays, mate selection, and perpetuation of genes. The purpose of this paper is to examine the adequacy of Dutton's concept of art in the context of significant counter-examples to his position from aesthetic theory and practice.

My general strategy will be to examine all twelve criteria, even though several of them share the same feature of conflating art in the descriptive sense (i.e., art as opposed to non-art) with art in the evaluative or normative sense (i.e., good art versus bad art). In these cases, I will develop my criticisms quicker because of the shared features. Elsewhere, I will move slower, although some attention needs to be paid to all the criteria insofar as Dutton sees them as relevant to defining art in both an evolutionary and contemporary sense.

Dutton's first criterion is direct pleasure: "The art object...is valued as a source of immediate experiential pleasure in itself, and not essentially for its utility in producing something else that is either useful or pleasurable."¹ This suggests an aesthetic model of art in which Dutton identifies the relevant quality as the "pleasure of beauty" or "aesthetic pleasure." Although he does not explicitly introduce Kantian theory at this point, it seems clear that he has in mind something akin to the sort of disinterested pleasure discussed by Kant in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*. Even if we do not understand—or may wish to ignore—the utility of an art object, we can certainly experience the foreground of aesthetic pleasure. Undeniably, many works of art function in this manner. They can give us a type of experience that the ancient Greeks understood as *aisthētikos*—the taking of pleasure in some aspect of sense perception for its own sake.

However, there are two relevant counter-examples at this point. First, it is possible to cite many cases of works of art that do not give direct pleasure; in fact, they might be rather displeasurable, and yet no one would dispute their status as works of art.² This often happens at the ‘conceptual center’ of the art world: we attend an art performance or experience an artistic object that for various reasons we do not enjoy. The second counter-example is more problematic. If one builds the experience of pleasure into the basic concept of art, then the notion of bad art is obscured or rendered incoherent. Evaluative terms or good-making qualities must not be installed at the heart of the concept of art, which presumably is a descriptive, not evaluative, term. Demographically and statistically, Dutton is surely right that art pleases most of the time. However, in a large number of situations, it does not. An interesting *reductio ad absurdum* here is the pieces included in the collection of the online *Museum of Bad Art*.³ Indeed, some of them are really quite bad in terms of inducing no direct pleasure, but they are still art.

Dutton’s second criterion is skill and virtuosity: “The making of the object or the performance requires and demonstrates the exercise of specialized skills...The demonstration of skill is one of the most deeply moving and pleasurable aspects of art.”⁴ Interestingly, Dutton separates skill from virtuosity. That is, the making of art undoubtedly does involve some degree of specific skill sets. These sets can be extremely minimal (e.g., children’s drawing or coloring) or extremely complex (as in the case of Gericault’s elaborate preparations for and work on *The Raft of the Medusa*). Even the random art-generators created by Dada involved an amount of skillful planning.

However, the question of virtuosity is another matter. I doubt that any professional aesthete would require *that* as a central aspect of the very concept of art as such. A missed note or two in a piano concerto, an area of injudicious composition in a painting, or a forgotten line in a presentation of *Hamlet* would hardly suffice to render these examples as non-art. The counter-example here is clear: all art may be skillful in some minimally specifiable way, but it need not be highly skillful. In a manner somewhat analogous to the Japanese style of craftsmanship known as *wabi-sabi*, the ‘conceptual center of the art world’ often accepts as works of art pieces that have flaws.

The third criterion is style: “Objects and performances in all art forms are made in recognizable styles, according to rules of form, composition, or expression.”⁵ Immediate counter-examples are unique works of arts that have no predecessors and thus do not adhere to existing rules of form, composition, or expression. One thinks here of the first readymade (Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913) and also of Kant’s discussion of judgments of singular beauty in which no concepts are being applied to a form of unknown purpose. I shall not insist on this, however, as Jerrold Levinson has done a credible job of discussing such cases and showing how they can be understood in terms of extensions of earlier, standard examples of historical art.⁶ The issue thus

becomes one of scope: is it true that all works of arts are made in recognizable styles, according to rules of form, composition, or expression? Perhaps so, if we allow that these rules can be very rudimentary, implicit, subconsciously used, etc. As we will see, the notion of style directly ties in with one of Dutton's later criteria, namely art traditions and institutions.

The fourth criterion is novelty and creativity: "Art is valued, and praised, for its novelty, creativity, originality, and capacity to surprise its audience."⁷ An important aspect of art for Dutton is thus its newness. However, the immediate problem is clear: how should one define 'creativity' and isn't it possible to have works of art that are not creative but still correctly classified as art? There are at least three ways to define creativity. In the strong sense, creativity means that which is unique—a work the likes of which has never been experienced before. Notwithstanding Levinson's view that novel works of art can be explained in terms of analogical extensions of earlier works of art, suppose for the sake of argument that such unique works are possible. They would certainly be rare. The 'conceptual center of the art world' is often filled with art that *has* been done before (it may be done ill or well, but that is an evaluative issue). Thus, to build novelty and creativity into the very center of the concept of art would unduly restrict art to only a few significant pieces each century, a view that is clearly too narrow. By contrast, if we adopt a second, weaker definition of creativity such that a work of art is said to be creative if it is new to the artist making it (for example, she is synthesizing techniques or styles already known to others), then it may well be that a considerable number of works of arts fit this category. However, this does not seem to be the sort of bold creativity that Dutton so admires. Lastly, we might say that creativity means 'bringing into existence something that did not previously exist.' However, this definition is banal since it would technically apply to all created works. It would also be too weak for Dutton's purposes. Thus, as we saw with direct pleasure, incorporating novelty and creativity into the concept of art is at odds with our commonsense notion that works of arts can both be pleasurable and displeasurable, as well as executed in a bold new way versus an appropriated style.

The fifth criterion is criticism: "Wherever artistic forms are found, they exist alongside some kind of critical language of judgment and appreciation, simple or, more likely, elaborate. This includes the shoptalk of art producers, the public discourse of critics, and the evaluative conversation of audiences."⁸ A possible counter-example would be a work of art that is produced in a solitary manner and is experienced by no one else other than the artist herself. Of course, she may engage in critical discourse in her own mind, but this is more of what Dutton calls an 'outlying' example. Clearly, the art worlds that constitute the 'conceptual center' are filled with critical discourse about art. The real problem here is whether such criticism somehow establishes art *as* art in the classificatory sense, or whether it is more relevant to the interpretation and evaluation of art

(i.e., works that are already known to be or taken to be art). If the latter is more likely the case (which I believe it is), then criticism cannot be used *per se* as a cluster criterion for defining art.

The sixth criterion is representation: “In widely varying degrees of naturalism, art objects, including sculptures, paintings, and oral and written narratives, and sometimes even music, represent or imitate real and imaginary experiences of the world.”⁹ The problem here is the term representation. If it means ‘imitates,’ ‘looks like,’ or ‘resembles,’ then important counter-examples would be all the non-representational styles that followed Cubism into the 20th century. Many of these styles are still at the ‘conceptual center’ of how large numbers of people regard art objects. The once revolutionary has now settled into the retirement homes of museums. On the other hand, if ‘representation’ means ‘standing for’ or ‘conveying,’ then Dutton is clearly right in alluding to many examples of art that do that. However, the definitional conflation muddies the issue. There are numerous non-representational works of art that are still unquestionably art.

The seventh criterion is special focus: “Works of art and artistic performances tend to be bracketed off from ordinary life, made a separate and dramatic focus of experience. In every known culture, art involves what the art theorist Ellen Dissanayake calls ‘making special.’”¹⁰ At first glance, it would seem that Dutton has in mind here—as mentioned earlier—something akin to the Kantian notion of disinterestedness, namely that art works should be noticed purely for their own sake and not for any ulterior, utilitarian motive. This is plausible as a defining feature of art. And yet Dutton’s examples of special focus are much more elaborate: “A gold-curtained stage, a plinth in a museum, spotlights, ornate picture frames, illuminated showcases...ceremonial aspects of public concerts and plays, an audience’s expensive clothes, the performer’s black tie, the presence of the czar in his royal box...”¹¹ Even though disinterestedness is not strictly a part of these examples, none of them are essential to the concept of art.

The eighth criterion is expressive individuality: “The potential to express individual personality is generally latent in art practices, whether or not it is fully achieved.”¹² Thus, in terms of general aesthetic demographics, Dutton is claiming that the mark of individuality or individual style is central to art. But the main counter-example would be generic, nondescript, even unsigned works of art that are commonly seen and accepted as art. Again, Dutton seems to be conflating defining art in the classificatory sense with identifying honorifics or good-making characteristics that are commonly found in art evaluation. This distinction is not, by the way, an ‘outlying’ or merely academic distinction made only by philosophers and critics. There is an obvious and commonsensical difference between saying that an object is art and saying whether you like it or not in terms of specific aspects such as expressive individuality.

The ninth criterion is emotional saturation: “In varying degrees, the experience of works of art is shot through with emotion.”¹³ This may be true, but further analysis is necessary. One would

like to have seen at this point, for example, a brief mention of Tolstoy and/or Collingwood, and their specific theories as to the role of emotions in art. How do works of art cause emotions and is this inevitable? If one is thinking exclusively of the emotional aspect of many works of art from Romanticism, then certainly there are works that are not thereby emotive. In contrast, if ‘emotive’ means ‘any sort of feeling the artist has that is passed along through the work,’ then this is perhaps superficially true but can hardly support what Dutton has in mind, given that his own examples are of more significant feelings being aroused by art. In addition, there are clearly works of art where no emotions are involved in the creative process and audiences need not believe or feel that they are involved with emotive works of art. Many conceptual pieces fit this category (e.g., Escher), as well as background types of musical or pictorial art that are used to establish décor and little else. Additional counter-examples would include fractal patterns generated by computers and action paintings by Pollock.

The tenth criterion is intellectual challenge: “Works of art tend to be designed to utilize the combined variety of human perceptual and intellectual capacities to the full extent; indeed, the best works stretch them beyond ordinary limits.”¹⁴ Certainly, the *best* works of arts do this, but do all works of arts? There are many works found at the ‘conceptual center’ in mainstream art worlds that are noticed and purchased for something other than their intellectual challenge. For example, some works of art are admired for their sheer sensuous surface, their value as investment commodities, their well-known makers or as something that increases status, and so on. A classic landscape painting might be admired simply because of its utterly magnificent look. We seem to find, again, that Dutton is introducing an aspect that not all works of art share.

The eleventh criterion is art traditions and institutions: “Art objects and performances, as much in small-scale oral cultures as in literate civilizations, are created and to a degree given significance by their place in the history and traditions of their art.”¹⁵ This view is not an unfamiliar visitor in aesthetic theory, as it has been advocated to a greater or lesser extent by theorists such as Danto, Dickie, and Levinson.¹⁶ Significant counter-examples would involve putative works of art created independently of art traditions and institutions.

Additionally, Dutton’s use of the terminology ‘given significance by their place in the history and traditions of their art’ is unclear. What does he mean by significance? If he means ‘meaning’ or ‘historical importance,’ then we have a criterion that more aptly belongs to the critical interpretation of art or to art history, but not to art’s very definition. An example will illustrate my point. Consider for a moment an alternative definition of art proposed by Thierry Lenain: “A work of art is a thing created by a process whose aim is to confer on it a special aesthetic presence.”¹⁷ Art objects for Lenain—for example, paintings—involve a deliberate process of choosing or creating appropriate painting equipment, creating and transforming the pictorial field into a symbolic or imaginary space

for the development of forms that have a specific ideational end point or aim, and creating balance, rhythm, composition, and harmony by means of a purposeful sense of order. Clearly, a putative art work (a painting) could satisfy these criteria without being a part of art traditions and institutions. In terms of defining or recognizing it as art, the latter traditions and institutions might conceivably be irrelevant, although the question of the work's critical meaning or proper place in art history would have to involve reference to said traditions and institutions. It is clear that several theorists have raised important criticisms of this approach, such as the very definition of the art world, its location or locations, its primordial or originary form, and whether art objects can be made outside the art world's traditions and institutions.¹⁸ What is the difference between the definition of the art world and, say, that of the sports world, and is the difference specifiable in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions? Is there only one art world or are there several as located in various metropolitan areas (need they be metropolitan)? Where did the art world come from; how did it originate historically? Moreover, isn't it possible to make art in cultural contexts that are independent of the art world? Dutton does not address these issues.

The last criterion is imaginative experience: "Finally, and perhaps the most important of all characteristics on this list, objects of art essentially provide an imaginative experience for both producers and audiences...for Kant, works of art are imaginative objects subject to disinterested contemplation. All art, in this way, happens in a make-believe world."¹⁹ It is likely that Dutton is right about this criterion, even though some counter-examples are possible where an audience is only interested in the lines, shapes, colors, forms, textures, and other formal qualities of a putative art object rather than some kind of make-believe world that the object suggests. In terms of the conceptual center of art in a cross-cultural sense, the vast majority of works do indeed seem to activate our imaginations in a disinterested way.

These twelve criteria constitute Dutton's most basic cross-cultural concept of art. He makes two further points about his list:

"While the cluster-criteria approach to understanding art does not specify in advance how many of the criteria need be present to justify calling an object art, the list nevertheless presents in its totality a definition of art: any object that possessed every feature on the list would have to be a work of art."²⁰

It seems that most objects would need far fewer than all twelve of Dutton's criteria in order correctly to be designated as art, and it is problematical that he is vague about which ones might be more relevant than others. However, in order to illustrate a more serious difficulty for Dutton's view, consider a putative art work that did in fact possess *all* of his criteria. That is, imagine a work

that gave considerable direct pleasure; that showed remarkable skill and virtuosity; that had a recognizable style; that was novel and creative; that was immersed in critical discourse; that was successfully representational; that had a special, even extraordinary focus; that expressed a high degree of individuality; that was saturated with emotion; that was intellectually challenging; that was central to existing art traditions and institutions; and that was significantly imaginative. Now, I think that under ordinary conditions in the world of art most critics would say that such a work is not merely art, but incredibly good or even great art. However, Dutton tells us that the work, having satisfied all twelve criteria, is art *per se*. If this is what it takes to be art as such, then his theory is obviously too narrow.

In addition, as I have stressed, too many of his criteria are honorifics or good-making aspects. I doubt that many people at the conceptual center of art in the world's various cultures would have difficulties seeing that one cannot collapse art evaluation into the issue of defining art. The distinction between the two areas is pre-theoretical, commonsensical, and does not require philosophical expertise.

Additionally, if we remove the criteria that are based in honorifics or good-making characteristics, Dutton's list would be pared to the following: style; criticism; representation; emotional saturation; historical traditions and institutions; and imaginative experience. In any event, Dutton himself indicates at the end of the sections discussing these six criteria that there are examples of the criteria from activities that would not normally be classified as artistic activities. In this sense, his theory (even trimmed to six criteria) is too broad.

Still, we need to take a closer look at these criteria. As I have noted, it is likely that all works of art have some kind of traditional, if not unique, style. Nevertheless, style need not be a definitional consideration for art as such. It seems to be more relevant to discourses about what *kind* of art is in question or how the art has been executed. In addition, it is likely that putative art objects do not have to be representational, saturated with emotion, or capable of inducing imaginative experiences. Finally, criticism in the context of historical traditions and institutions, while important in terms of the issue of *interpreting* art works or attempting to determine their subject matter, need not be necessary for establishing what art is as such from a classificatory perspective. Dutton's non-honorific criteria seem to be too critically 'high end' in nature. What I mean by this is that he ignores the role that 'low end' formal features might play in defining art in a minimal way. Once it has been established, for example, that an object has been intentionally created as a candidate for aesthetic notice merely in terms of focusing on lines, shapes, colors, textures, smells, tones, and so on, for their own sake, and this has been accomplished by moving from a utilitarian frame of mind to a disinterested one, the resulting artifact could correctly be identified as art—an approach akin to Lenain's. The fundamental problem for Dutton's twelve point theory is that he does not consider

such a formalist approach and he also complicates matters by including too many criteria that, as noted, are clearly honorific in nature and thus belong to the domain of evaluating art, not defining it. Additionally, Dutton's evolutionary aesthetics stresses 'successful' art as a function of sexual selection and such success (or failure) is likely tangential to the classification question of whether or not a given artifact is art simpliciter. An artist's ability, that is, to attract a mate by way of making art objects involving one or more of Dutton's twelve criteria is a separate conceptual question.

The second point Dutton makes about his list is that it "identifies the most common and easily graspable 'surface features' of art, its traditional, customary, or pretheoretical characteristics that are observed across the world."²¹ He observes that in order to do this, one does not need experts—presumably art critics, philosophers of art, art historians, and the like. He argues by the following analogy: one does not need to be any kind of expert to know what a liquid is, whereas to know whether a liquid contains methanol one *does* need expertise. Thus, to follow the analogy, people commonly and pretheoretically know what art is (in terms of his cluster criteria) even though they may know nothing about the special aesthetic categories developed by philosophers (such as form vs. content, visually-indistinguishable-pairs, and so on). Clearly, there is a significant disanalogy in Dutton's argument. A liquid is immediately experienced as such by any sentient being with properly functioning physiology, but what constitutes art is in a different, more complicated category. He says the cluster criteria "tell us what we already know about the arts."²² However, it is unclear that what people around the world know about the arts (or art per se) involves conflation of classificatory and evaluative aspects. This does a kind of disservice to peoples' ordinary talk about what art is, on the one hand, and whether, on the other hand, they like or dislike a particular art object or whether the object has been successful in terms of sexual selection issues. If evolutionary aesthetics in general collapses this distinction, then philosophers should rightly regard it as in need of arguments and distinctions more careful than those Dutton provides.

Endnotes

¹ Dutton 2009, 52.

² Paradigm cases of aesthetically displeasurable art works can be found in the [Museum of Bad Art](#).

³ See [The Museum of Bad Art](#).

⁴ Dutton 2009, 53.

⁵ Dutton 2009, 53.

⁶ See Levinson 1995 (especially pages 232-233).

⁷ Dutton 2009, 54.

⁸ Dutton 2009, 54.

⁹ Dutton 2009, 55.

¹⁰ Dutton 2009, 55.

¹¹ Dutton 2009, 55.

¹² Dutton 2009, 56.

¹³ Dutton 2009, 56.

¹⁴ Dutton 2009, 57.

¹⁵ Dutton 2009, 58.

¹⁶ Levinson 1995.

¹⁷ Lenain 1997, 114.

¹⁸ For one example, see Valentine 2005.

¹⁹ Dutton 2009, 58.

²⁰ Dutton 2009, 61.

²¹ Dutton 2009, 59.

²² Dutton 2009, 60.

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