



Discerning Values: Aesthetics Today via Shakespeare and Van Eyck

The transition from raw perception to discernment adds aesthetic value in the examination of art. The aesthetic play of perceptions in Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini double portrait is intensified by its multiplication of focal points. William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* opens with an inquiry into raw perception as a Bohemian statesman whimsically suggests that he will slip drugs to his Sicilian guests during an upcoming visit so that no qualitative differences between locales can be perceived. Both works broach the idea that values can be shaped by perceptions and transformed through aesthetic discernment.

Nelson Goodman's nominalist, Joseph Margolis's relativist, and Arthur Danto's transfiguring aesthetics treat perception on different levels. For Goodman, "realism is a matter of habit," though objective facts will eventually be discerned through close observation.¹ In Margolis's relativism, we "cannot disjoin the 'ontologies' of selves and artworks, because, like language and action, artworks are the culturally apt *utterances* of culturally formed selves (ourselves)."² Danto believes that identical works may be differentiated into species of art and nonart based on subjective values. He expands greatly on Walter Benjamin's tracing of authenticity in art to its "aura."³

Goodman creates a hypothetical based on perceiving differences over time between an authentic work and a seemingly identical but known forgery. We come to determine authenticity via relatively unfiltered perceptions. Goodman's nominalism assumes differentiation according to value. Danto extends Goodman's hypothetical toward transfiguration. Danto imagines identical red squares, all but one a distinct artwork. For him, artistry is not inherent in the physical makeup of the work itself, "Put more metaphysically, the molecules are part of the object without necessarily being part of the work."⁴ One red square is called *Red Dust* while a twin is merely an accident involving red paint. Because the sensed colors are identical, the mind imposes upon the red squares their status as art or nonart. Even readymade art can have value for Danto depending on the philosophical concept affirming its validity.

My concept of the work called *Red Dust* cannot be extended to any identical red square, for by intension it refers to only a single one. All of Danto's red squares are valued as objects in full, not fakes. On Margolis's cultural relativist view, Danto errs in reducing perception to physics; instead, he defines perception as "culturally prepared competence."⁵ For him, our perceptions are always already culturally modified, a condition which is crucial to the indiscernibility questions surrounding the initial unveiling of Hermione-as-statue in *The Winter's Tale*.

Danto makes indiscernibility an aesthetic value prompted for example by Warhol's *Brillo Box*. Warhol adds aesthetic value to a commonplace of commercial mass production by placing his replica in a gallery setting. Danto emphasizes that fluency in history and

provenance informs our aesthetics but, metaphorically speaking, an earth-bound artifact is transported to the art world. For Margolis, perception means physics *plus* socialization, giving us not just Danto's "*savoir*" but Margolis's cultural "*savoir-faire*."⁶

In the statue scene, Shakespeare's heroine, Hermione, Queen of Sicilia, moves through different aesthetic forms so fluidly that she grants Goodman, Danto, and Margolis a measure of justification. Goodman's claim, if applied to the play, is that we can eventually tell by looking that Hermione is alive, not a statue, yielding a new symbolic world. Danto's claim, if applied to the play, defines the moment we begin to distinguish Hermione-the-performer from Hermione as sculpture. Even if elements in this discernment process endure only briefly, they are no less aesthetically valid. Margolis's cultural relativist claim, if applied to the play, is justified given the full context of Hermione's aesthetic presentation in the "natural and cultural worlds."⁷ Danto's point that variations in the molecular or sub-molecular composition of visually identical works support the case for aesthetic transfiguration is for Margolis a marginal issue. Margolis would hold that evaluating an artwork necessarily entails "robust relativism" in which equally valid though absolutely conflicting interpretations arise from the same artistic data.⁸ For Margolis, transfiguration has no greater purchase on truth in art than it does in nature because perception is a cultural construct.

Hilary Putnam has most recently argued that facts and values are entangled, but his earlier hypothetical about water on Earth (H₂O) and Twin Earth (XYZ) having no apparent difference apart from molecular structure treats the issue of indiscernibility on

grounds favoring Margolis, “Extension is *not* determined by psychological state.”⁹ Brute facts cannot be altered or established even through the most strenuous mental effort given that the earthling and his interplanetary twin say “water” but refer to indiscernibly different liquids (H₂O and XYZ). Despite Danto’s claims about the philosophical determination of art, on Putnam’s view two physically identical artworks will in fact have the same extension whatever meaning we may wish ascribe to them individually. Yet Putnam’s quip that meanings “ain’t just in the *head!*” can be taken to modify Margolis’s position in that meanings may be partly in the head.¹⁰ Aesthetic discernment may have a subjective particularity, which Margolis allows when pressed by Danto.

Danto is more interested in transfiguring the ordinary than proving his aesthetics through an analysis of molecules; still, his aim to “separate perception from interpretation” is meant to emphasize the artist’s intention in aesthetics.¹¹ Why possess *Red Dust* if the mental state associated with the artwork, not the artwork itself, is of greatest importance? For Danto, aesthetics is virtually all in the head, while for Margolis what is in the head owes a great deal to culture.

Where Goodman defends an expansive view of symbolic world-making, Jacques Derrida argues quite effectively that we cannot value those worlds with any certainty. He rejects as unknowable Heidegger’s claim that the shoes in Van Gogh’s paintings belong to a homespun peasant. Derrida suggests that the shoes may belong to a city dweller, or to Van Gogh, or be remembered, or connote other body parts, or have no origin or destination. For Derrida, even the most purely objective view of art has blind spots.¹²

Art and aesthetics in their entirety may be acts of blindness, always searching productively as they feel their way along. While Danto claims that art depends on philosophy, Derrida would counter that a powerful strain in his own philosophy is based on an aesthetic stance of openness to the Other.

Van Eyck inscribes his name and date above a convex mirror upper center reflecting the presence of two visitors, whose identity is uncertain. The emphasis added to the mirror device by his inscription, "*Johannes de eyck fuit hic, 1434,*" supports Derrida's point in "Signature Event Context" on the insuperable distance between trace and presence. Yet in *The Truth in Painting* some 16 years later, Derrida prefers to focus on the Arnolfini shoes as "*parergon,*" defined not as decoration but as a transfiguring value creating aesthetic alliances outside the work proper.¹³ As we see in Van Eyck, perceptions trend toward infinity: the viewer beholds the Arnolfinis; the Arnolfinis greet the viewer; the artist sees the Arnolfinis and the implied viewer in front of the painting and from behind the couple via the mirror; the artist (if it is the artist) is reflected in the mirror with a companion viewing the scene from a reverse angle; and so on. Van Eyck multiplies perspectives to such a degree that a point of origin gradually disappears, which anticipates Derrida's observation about Van Gogh's and Van Eyck's shoes. Derrida demonstrates that the play or "give" in discernment is an aesthetic value here and now, independent of a remote art world like the one Danto imagines.

The value of aesthetic discernment is reaffirmed in the statue scene. We have been alerted to judge Hermione as a masterpiece of sculpture created by no less an artist than Julio Romano, so we do not see her with eyes innocent of aesthetic expectations.

Hermione's performance as a statue occupies a distinct space, or virtual gallery, within the common playing area. Indiscernibility is made an aesthetic issue because she becomes her own readymade or artifact, one of inestimable value. Hermione-as-statue becomes Hermione-the-performer before returning to Hermione-as-character, transformations partly determined by the actor and communicated to us at a pace to be decided by the actors. The more she does nothing but stand still, the more we add our creative powers of discernment to her self-creation as art. We may detect a barely perceptible alteration in her demeanor over the disparaging remarks about her age wrinkles made by her unwitting husband, Leontes, King of Sicilia. That is, she subtly communicates with us over the heads of her fellow actors on stage. She may be considered a forerunner to today's multimedia performance artists by complicating aesthetics to an unprecedented degree even by our standards.

The play casts three forms of perception into suspicion. The first is exemplified by Leontes, whose credo may be summed up as: seeing is believing. Images sear themselves directly into his consciousness. Aesthetic discernment is obviously not his forte. The second error arises from the Third Gentleman, an onlooker, who believes that we can form true images of the play's reunion scene based solely on good hearsay evidence, "That which you hear you'd swear you see."¹⁴ The third error arises from Polixenes, King of Bohemia. Polixenes fails to discern what he sees before his very eyes, namely Perdita as royally born. Quite the opposite of Leontes, he discounts perception completely. Discernment implies knowledge accrued over time shaping evaluation in aesthetics; therefore, values though great are not universal givens.

Of the triumvirate of Goodman, Danto, and Margolis, Danto's work is currently cited the most by aestheticians who place greater emphasis on perception as cognitive activity than on discerning aesthetic values or actual perceiving in their ongoing discussion about the status of readymade art. Two elements of Goodman's theory remain influential: first, aesthetic value is no guarantee of aesthetic merit; and second, aesthetic authenticity may obtain in cases of both actual and potential perceiving. His view that aesthetic value equals cognitive value continues in art criticism today, for example, in Ronald de Sousa's focus on aesthetics as a biological adaptation.¹⁵

Currently, the presence of the artwork is held by some to be superfluous. If we are familiar with Paris, we can be told that Christo wrapped the Pont Neuf and form a reasonably clear impression about the results without actually seeing the work. Even in the absence of the artwork itself, on this view we may have an aesthetic experience. This notion instantiates how reading a score consisting of mere marks on a page can strike a musician as beautiful. James Shelley frames the contention over "non-perceptual art" in this fashion, "Agreement that art is essentially aesthetic means little when you disagree about what it is to be art and what it is to be aesthetic."¹⁶ Clearly, our era lacks a unified theory of aesthetics.

Three different values of perception emerge in aesthetics today among art theorists, whose personal understanding and appreciation of art is not at issue: (1) Goodman, Margolis, and Derrida place a high premium on perception to gain full aesthetic value

from art that may initially seem obscure. My treatment of Van Eyck and Shakespeare falls into this broadly hermeneutic-aesthetic category; (2) Perception has a low value because it is assumed or given for a group including James Shelley, who believes that the artwork need not actually be perceived to produce an aesthetic response. Because this group does not separate the aesthetic response from logical judgment, they depart from the Kantian heritage, in which aesthetic judgment is based on a disinterested subjective representation; (3) Perception has moderate value for a group including Danto and Noël Carroll, who believe that art like Warhol's *Brillo Box* need not possess conventional aesthetic values but *once seen* produces an aesthetic or related experience "of a high degree of intensity for its kind."¹⁷ This group may be said to trace its origins indirectly to Hegel, for whom the artwork is valued according to its relationship to the idea of beauty and for whom mere observation is pedestrian.

I have been privileging aesthetic discernment but would suggest an alternative that values raw perception as measured by science. A young man, blind since infancy, undergoes an operation restoring his sight. By any measure, it is a scientific triumph. Yet he initially sees masses of color moving about aimlessly, which he finds extremely disorienting and obviously lacking in aesthetic value though the problem is ultimately resolved. In this instance, science and art remain within the limits of value, though that value may not always be present or given.

Van Eyck and Shakespeare express an aesthetic theory of modernity before Warhol or even Marcel Duchamp, with his famous readymades. Shakespeare's innovation in

shifting aesthetic focal points outside the framework of the artwork proper would have been realized in performance if Hermione carries the aesthetic burden that I have been advocating. Van Eyck's lines of perspective lead to the convex mirror, where they radiate outward. The perspective lines are not meant to intersect rigidly at one point in the mirror; instead, their approximate intersection creates a diffused effect. The roof lines intersect at the mirror's edge at approximately 10 o'clock, while the floor lines intersect on the mirror at about 5 o'clock. Van Eyck's perspective lines meet in his other works, so this painting reflects a "give" or play in perception that is further enhanced with the invention of oil-based paints attributed to Van Eyck and his circle. Both Danto and Derrida would call these artists' moves transfigurations, but where Danto expresses this aesthetic in metaphysical terms, Derrida keeps the hermeneutic-aesthetic options open.

In addition to Danto's aesthetics of aboutness, the institutional and the open theories predominate in aesthetic theory today. The latter two discount values and aesthetics while favoring identification over definition. George Dickie's institutional theory presents a "value-neutral sense of art."¹⁸ It disengages from value once the lowest threshold of aesthetic acceptance has been met. The open theory traces its roots to Wittgenstein. It rejects definitions of aesthetics as unworkable and insufficient but assigns a value to art's cognitive effects, or "seeing-as."

Institutional theory does not regard perception as a problem because it is a theory of the acceptance of an artifact as art by a valuing public, not a theory of aesthetics per se.

Dickie claims that there are "no criteria of aesthetic *excellence*; there are only criteria of

aesthetic value.”¹⁹ But “value” here means only that the artifact has been embraced as art. It does not rate the quality of art. The artifact either has value as art or it does not according to the relevant cultural institutions. Because anything could be subject to this limited form of evaluation, an extended assessment of excellence in art has no more urgency than the evaluation of merit in automobiles or toasters.

The open theory is surprisingly value-neutral given that art need not be defined beyond noting a family resemblance among other similar types. To define art more narrowly would prevent art from expanding into new forms. Perception in art matters as to aspect change, in which elements of a work shift in and out of focus. The most celebrated instance of aspect change in the open theory is the rabbit-duck image, in which value is insignificant compared to the alteration in our interpretation of the visual puzzle.

Goodman does not assign value to art but he does to symbolic thinking, in which art and science participate. For Danto, science can distinguish between natural kinds but plays no role in the determination of art absent transfiguration. Danto and Derrida ultimately get the better of this friendly dispute, though their values on transfiguration differ. Where art is concerned, science is always within the limits of value, though aesthetic values may exceed the limits of science.

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¹ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Bobbs, 1968), 38.

² Joseph Margolis, "Farewell to Danto and Goodman," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38, no. 4 (1998): 370.

³ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, 1955 [1936]), 225.

⁴ Arthur C. Danto, "Indiscernibility and Perception: A Reply to Joseph Margolis," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 39, no. 4 (1999): 323.

⁵ Joseph Margolis, "A Closer Look at Danto's Account of Art and Perception," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40, no. 3 (2000): 328.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 335.

⁸ Joseph Margolis, "Robust Relativism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35, no.1 (1976): 37.

⁹ Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," in *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers, Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 222.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹¹ Danto, "Indiscernibility," 324.

¹² Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: the Self-Portrait and other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 55.

¹⁴ William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. Susan Snyder and Deborah T. Curren-Aquino (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5.2.32-33.

¹⁵ Ronald de Sousa, "Is Art an Adaptation? Prospects for an Evolutionary Perspective on Beauty," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62, no. 2 (2004): 110.

¹⁶ James Shelley, "The Problem of Non-Perceptual Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43, no. 4 (2003): 363, 365.

¹⁷ Noël Carroll, "Art and Interaction," *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). 13.

¹⁸ George Dickie, *Art and Value* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 56.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.