Doing Without Art

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New Literary History, Volume 42, Number 1, Winter 2011, pp. 53-69
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/nlh.2011.0008

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Jacques Rancière’s *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2004, English translation 2009) opens with two sentences that, for determined vandals like me, hum with promise. “Aesthetics has a bad reputation. Hardly a year goes by without a new book either proclaiming that its time is over or that its harmful effects are being perpetuated.” There was indeed a time in the 1980s when things looked encouragingly grim for aesthetics. The decade was framed at one end by Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1979, English translation 1984), which influentially argued that the idea of the distinctiveness of art and of aesthetic judgement was best understood as a distributor of cultural capital, and at the other by Terry Eagleton’s *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), which offered a similar critique of the ideological work that the idea of the aesthetic had been made to do, but over a much longer period. For a brief, irradiated space, it looked as if aesthetic theory had entered its autumn.

In fact, Rancière tells us that aesthetics has not had to wait for some “supercilious champion of Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophy” to do it in, since “[t]he discontent with aesthetics is as old as aesthetics itself.” His own purpose is to show “how aesthetics, as a regime for identifying art, carries a politics, or metapolitics, within it.” Rancière himself comes at the end of a long line of critics, philosophers, and public relations officers who find in the very parlousness of the plight of aesthetics a kind of promise. This line even includes the odd supercilious Anglo-Saxon, such as Morris Weitz, in a once-notorious paper of 1956, innocuously entitled “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics.” Guides to aesthetics are still liable to tell you that this essay represents the most thoroughgoing dismissal of the idea that it is possible to provide any definition of art or the aesthetic. It is true that Weitz does bring forward some burly arguments of this kind for the first part of his essay. But then he goes and spoils it all when he provides us with his reason why the categories of art and the aesthetic can never be defined, which is the indefinability of art itself. Art is indefinable, he says, not because the aesthetic does not exist; but because it is of the essence of art to be uncontainable by definitions. Weitz concludes, therefore, that the aesthetic is not a noncategory, but an open category, or category of the open. It was on
the rebound from Weitz’s essay, dismayed by its fifth-act rescue of art from perdition, that I decided on my policy of zero tolerance for talk of the aesthetic.

The argument that the presence of art is to be suspected, and therefore talk of aesthetics occasioned, wherever the question “is this art, I wonder?” is asked in an intense or interesting enough way, is to be found in many recent champions of art as the category of the open. For Jean-François Lyotard, this openness is to be accounted for in terms of the aesthetics of the sublime, an aesthetics organized not around the contemplation of anything that could be unambiguously given to experience and judgment, but around the call of a certain question, the question of what is happening? It is clear that for Lyotard, the aesthetics of the sublime has become aesthetics as such, in the form of an outlook, disposition, or mode of attention. Not only is there no necessary kind of object available for this mode of attention to be attentive to, the very question of the availability or not of an object is what forms an aesthetic mode of attention (this is supposed to work searingly and savingly against the tendency of the artworld’s institutions to instance and institute things). This anti-institutional definition of the aesthetic piggybacks on the purely classificatory part of the definition of the aesthetic to produce an evaluative account (Lyotard is fond of telling us that there is no way of passing from description to evaluation without violence or arbitrariness, but he is adept at making the passage himself.) Art and the aesthetic are to be found wherever art is under threat or in question. Whenever you catch yourself asking “is this art at all?” you can be sure that it in large part is. For such a definition, the gap between the aesthetic and the artistic is a positive advantage for both.

If the 1980s were characterized by a systematic suspicion of aesthetic ideology, guided by powerful critiques such as those of Walter Benjamin, Bourdieu, Paul de Man, and Eagleton, the political philosophy of the new theoretical generation that has come to prominence in the last decade, as represented by the work of Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben, Rancière, and Alain Badiou, of which such greatly respectful notice is currently being taken in the Anglo-American academy, has been characterised by an astonishing willingness to reinstate the numinous 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 formalization of a truth beyond merely predicable truth. Art, he writes in his Handbook of In aesthetics, is both immanent, in that “Art is rigorously coextensive with the truths that it generates,” and absolutely singular, in that “These truths are given nowhere else than in art.” 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]." Here the gestures of simultaneously emptying art of all particular significance and saturating it with pregnancy and puissance are once again strongly in evidence.

I would be tempted to suspect that the use of the word “aesthetic” is a mere harmless academic quirk, were it not for this stubborn compulsion to obtuseness that seems to affect everybody who consents to use the term. For a while, I concluded that there must be lots of people who found talk about the “aesthetic” vacuous, mystical, or silly; it’s just that they never write about the topic of aesthetics. The only people who write about aesthetics are people who think there is something there to write about, and who should therefore be disqualified by their very credulity from doing so. Almost any book or article you pick up by anyone who permits themselves the use of the word “aesthetic” in their title is going to come up sooner or later with a more or less delirious definition of the term, suggesting that the writer has either never attentively had any experience even approximating to the kinds of experience said to be aesthetic, or perhaps has never had any other kind of experience whatsoever. It is this that has convinced me, somewhat against my better, milder judgement, to argue for urgent purgative measures with respect to this way of talking. Aesthetics anyone? Just say no.

So, for some time now, I have been persuaded that there are no features that are unique to artworks, and no single feature that all artworks possess. The simple consequence of this seems to me to be that there is no determinate object, or range of objects for the intellectual pursuit known as aesthetics—at least in the common acceptation 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 is 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 categorized as art, in all their huge abundance and brindled variety. Far from having anything against them, I am all for the continuation of reflections on the nature and effects of caesura, the representation of tyranny in Elizabethan tragedy, the evolution and advantages of oil-based paints, and the use of diminished sevenths. But the claim I want to defend is that there is exactly nothing about art qua art that is available for investigation.

It has been suggested to me that this sets the bar implausibly high for a definition of art, which is really much better understood, not as unified
by a single and continuous quiddity, but as amicably held together in something like a family resemblance. This is all very well, but something defined by this kind of family resemblance cannot at all do the solemn, redemptive, critical, etc., work that is claimed for art. Those who are happy to concede that art is an ungovernably dappled thing when it is a question of defining what we may be talking about are asking for the bar to be set modestly at ankle level when they are jumping it, but then want to raise it to world-record height when it’s a matter of claims about the powers of art.

When I first tried writing about these matters in an essay entitled, bracingly, I thought, “What If There Were No Such Thing As The Aesthetic?” (1999) my focus was largely on such 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 nonrepresentational) works, and therefore whether it was credible to attempt to distinguish specifically “aesthetic” qualities or responses. I am not entirely sure what I was expecting the global consequences to be of the news I broke then, and have been whimpering ever since, of the nonexistence of the aesthetic. But I have been surprised, in the way one always is, by how little difference my arguments have made to anyone to whom I have divulged them. The rational and benignly bien-pensant persons of which my social and intellectual circle is exclusively composed 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, for I have become used to the business-as-usual move in academic life of taking any demonstration of the nonexistence of gnomes and kobolds as a seminal contribution to Fairy Studies. But the commonest response has been to suggest that, although, strictly speaking, if you insist, yes, there were too many different things that “the aesthetic” was said to be and thought to have to do with, and too many million incompatible powers and propensities that had been advanced in its name, but still, 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 curbing 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 ways of arranging this one. So the argument was a little like the argument for banning alcohol. Sure, if inebriating liquors were to come onto the market for the first time now, they would be very unlikely to be legalized, but to extirpate everything with which the consumption of alcohol is 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 demoralizing.

So the question which has gathered for me in recent years has been, why, when it 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. I thought of myself as a pragmatist, but 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?

It now seems to me that my original essay so abandoned itself to the delicious task of showing that there could be no such thing as aesthetics that it neglected to respond to its own question about the consequences of abandoning belief in the aesthetic, or the “art” which it took as its defining object. So I want here to try to finish that unfinished business, by laying 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 nonsensical 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 unprovable powers that are claimed for art, I should acknowledge that the question of definition cannot be entirely left behind in favor of a discussion of effects, so I would like to allow
myself to take one more pop at it, precisely inasmuch as it bears on
the relation between defining what art is and what it is thought to do.

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 universal-
izing 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 universalizing statement? 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. While 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
type 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 logi-
cal 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 greed-
ily 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.

One can and should bring these considerations to bear on any general
statement about art or its characteristic powers—for example Alain Ba-
diou’s claims, quoted a little earlier, that “[a]rt is rigorously coextensive
with the truths that it generates . . . truths [that] are given nowhere else
than in art,” so that “[w]hat art educates us for is therefore nothing apart
from its own existence.” 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, let me just say that I don’t see how
statements of this kind are to be applied accurately or noncircularly 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. 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 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, less grandiose in application, and ultimately more circular
than it might otherwise seem.

So now, armed or burdened with these presumptions, I want to ask
and answer three questions. First, what do we do with art? Second, how
can we do without art? And finally, and by far most importantly, 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—what is good beyond all calculations of
relative advantage and deficit. We want to believe in the possibility of
an impossible thing that is good in itself 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,” without the idea that there could be some kind of possibility of goodness in general 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 totipotence, its capacity to take on any form, like the fabled 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 artworks. As John Carey has observed in *What Good are the Arts?* (2006), these claims are very rarely subject to any kind of empirical testing. It is widely assumed that the experience of art makes us fuller, 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 realize 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 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 with a defiance of ways of knowing. The work of Emmanuel Levinas, who insisted that the other could never be simply or straightforwardly known or approached 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 to those who would give art a special privilege in opening or preserving the mysterious, ineffable aperture onto 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 it.
Doing Without Art

What would it mean to do without art? Let us think for a little while about the “without” in that phrase, which 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 War 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.”

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.” 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 Gauloise-shaped hole in the world, an art-shaped ache. As long as you 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 decrystalization; 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.\(^{15}\)

Actually, 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.”\(^{14}\) 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.\(^{15}\)

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 harder 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 it gets 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, of course, is precisely not to think about doing without art, otherwise the lingering art-ache will be like Jacques 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.)\(^{16}\) 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 critique of 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 imperative
pleasures. Rather, 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 habits and practices you are deprecating. 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 learned 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, as a work of art, it is in some obscure way not, or not only, the thing 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 a 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 on 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, or very possibly a “garden,” in the service of art. The something more that art is, in the case of Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*, for example, involves a great deal of ontological weight loss. What art adds to things is their lessening, an hypothecated deporting from their natural or apparent conditions, the fading down of their *haecceitas*.

I always find it rather odd that so many people should be so willing to designate themselves as artists; 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 workingmen’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 badly, 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 worldview 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, specialized in putting spanners in the works of our apprehension of the way things are.

This is perhaps at once the strongest and the weakest claim 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 claim, is to view it as emptily self-aggrandizing tautology. But there is a more substantial way of taking the 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 an exception from 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 humor, in that humor 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 that artists and pranksters have come closer together.

This argument seems to me to be close to an argument mounted by Ellen Dissanayake 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 special things, 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.17 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 a 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 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, 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 will make them happen, so art is the license given to the idea that one can set the world apart from itself simply by regarding it as 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. I avoid the number 13, for example, not because I think it is unlucky, but because I fear that, if something bad happens to me on the 13th or in seat 13, I will start believing in its malign potency. Indeed, in so far as I view the belief in the powers of art as a species of magical thinking, I have 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 relying on it.

But, if Ellen Dissanayake 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 doing without it, in much the same way as I am undoubtedly a little worse off for not being able to attach any credence to the theory and practice of homeopathy or chiropracty, since if I could, there would be a strong chance of my benefiting from my credulity.

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.

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, not what they are. It’s partly because the older I get, the more interested I become in the actuality of things, about which it increasingly appears I know hardly anything, rather than in the tired epistemological tricks I can play on them, which I have been watching myself pull off for years. It’s mostly a mathematical matter, like so much 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 subtracted 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, more 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 excepting 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 withered back into the poor-but-honest condition of naming something brought about through the exercise of art or skill. There seem to me to be at least 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, organization, 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.” A second is that we might be able to become alive to the kinds of artifice and artistry in actions and practices that are not recognized as, or only intermittently allowed to be, arts. A third is that we might be able to make out more clearly and subject to informed and withering analysis the many blunders, illusions, sleights of hand, and wish-fulfilments that have constituted the long history of belief in the powers of art—along the lines of postreligious 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 in what might be seen as a fourth form of advantage, what we could call a hermeneutics of permission, in which things were allowed to be, and become, as interesting as we could make them. I have been thinking on and off for some time, for example, about the place in my life of ordinary objects, like combs, bags, and batteries, and the ways in which we form our relations with and through them. I have taken to adumbrating a philosophy of fidgeting that might be developed to characterize our relation to such things and have been wearied by the suggestion that I have sometimes met that this interest has something to do with developing an “aesthetics of everyday life,” and thus with the principles of emancipation, transfiguration, or resistance that such an aesthetic would underwrite. I find myself not wanting to consent to this numbing manoeuvre, and especially not to the condescending attitude towards everyday life that those who think they have access to something else, through art, for example, like to adopt. Alas, alleluia, everyday life is the only kind I have ever had or am ever going to have. I am just interested in buttons, pins, cards, sticky tape, and elastic bands, interested in what interests me about them, interested to see if I can make up a way of writing about them, that’s all, and I promise you it’s plenty, the plenty that can pour from doing without art.

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