

The Reasons

of
Art



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Anchoring Art

(Comment on Sparshott)

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Professor Sparshott presents his thesis of the inherent contestability of art after a brief discussion of avant-garde art driven by the hopeless ambition of superseding the art establishment. Without swallowing the claim that this has been almost the whole substance of the idea of the avant-garde, I would accept that the contestability of art is a plausible proposition in that kind of context. In connection with the new, one can always raise the question Is this really a work of art?; at least, it does not seem immediately implausible to maintain that that is so.

But to go on from that proposition to the general claim that all works of art, old and new, are inherently contestable is another matter. Is it really an open question whether such works as Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Beethoven's *Eroica*, Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and Michelangelo's *David* are works of art? In his latest book, Professor Sparshott writes that "Each of these is a work of art, if anything is; we would be more surprised if a history of the relevant art left them out than if it included them."¹ And he adds in a footnote that a denial that one of them is a work of art would be a mark of ignorance, more or less profound according to the circumstances in which the denial took place.² This suggestion is worth following up, for it would seem to open up a way to some of the issues behind the thesis that art is inherently contestable.

One could construct a series of cases illustrating an increasingly profound ignorance, starting with cases like children denying that *Mona Lisa* and *The Divine Comedy* are works of art, and advancing through college students doing that, and revolutionary young artists shouting the same kind of thing, to well-trained theoreticians claiming quietly that it is always possible to deny that a given work of art is a work of art, after all. Let us leave the beginning of that series of cases to the proud parents and despairing teachers. The end of the series is more interesting from a philosophical point of view. Indeed, I should like to propose that the thesis of the inherent contestability of art rests on a mistake of the same order as Descartes's universal doubt and other forms of scepticism. According to Descartes, it is possible to doubt ab-

1. Frank Sparshott, *The Theory of the Arts*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1982.

p. 3.
2. Sparshott, p. 503 n.

solutely all propositions (except one, which I shall be discreet enough not to mention in this context). It is possible, according to Descartes, to doubt that I am standing here, that these are my two hands, that three plus two is five, that a quadrangle has only four sides, and so forth. Various therapies have been suggested to cure us of such doubts, which could be used with some profit also in connection with doubts about the status of works of art.

Following Dr. Johnson, we could travel round the world kicking at assorted masterpieces in selected museums of art, which would undoubtedly teach us something about the institutions of art (not to speak of other institutions), but not enough for present purposes. Following G. E. Moore, we could try to hold the masterpieces up to inspection (usually a difficult task, given the security measures in most museums and the weight of many of the pieces), which again would not teach us quite enough. Or following Wittgenstein, we could reflect upon how works of art are embedded in our practices, which I tend to think is a better approach to the problems we are concerned with now.

A Cartesian sceptic could, for example, propose that he could be mistaken with regard to his own name and sex. But how could he be mistaken with regard to those things? Borderline cases apart, and assuming that Descartes was not a borderline case, there is simply no way in which one can be permanently mistaken with regard to one's own sex, since we acquire the concept of sex by reference to such paradigm cases as most of us are. Similarly for personal names: "There is no place in the naming institution which I can take and which is such that I can check whether I am wrong with regard to my own name."³ Both the concept of sex and our own names are anchored in the world of practice in such ways as to exclude fundamental doubt of the Cartesian type.

Does the same apply to the concept of the work of art? Here, unlike Pilate, I do stand for an answer. Think of what a person must know in order to be able to raise the question Is this a work of art? at all. At least, he must know what a work of art is, that is, he must master the concept of work of art; and how do we acquire that concept? By being confronted with a number of clear examples of works of art, which then function as our paradigms of what a work of art is. The criterion of mastery in the field of conceptual competence lies in our ability to continue the given series of clear cases in ways that are adequate for the purposes at hand, to put it in general terms—which presupposes that there are several paradigms to start with. The art-sceptic's mistake would then consist in not having noted that our concepts are not just contingently anchored in the world. (Think of the consequences for the world of art of removing such pillars of art as *Hamlet* and *Mona Lisa* and the *Eroica* and Diaghilev and Homer and Rembrandt. How much would remain of the

3. H. Grimen, in a manuscript of 1962.

concept of art if all that is removed *along with everything else that is sufficiently similar to it* in the relevant respects, which I leave to the iconoclast to specify.)

Against this background, I suggest that the thesis of the inherent contestability of art is untenable. At least, it has to be provided with a number of provisos to take care of the fact that the very concept of work of art is firmly embedded in the given practices, including a number of paradigm cases, in ways that are familiar to all of us but that are difficult to verbalize adequately—which takes me to the second stage of Professor Sparshott's argument for the inherent contestability of art.

Works of art, he maintains, are always contestable since a work of art is a work of art only under an interpretation, and interpretations are inherently contestable. But is that always so? Think, for instance, of an oil painting that has been executed following a detailed contract between patron and painter, specifying the situation and figures to be depicted as well as the format and the colours to be used, and so on—how much scope for disagreement do such cases really leave for interpreters? And consider a case where we don't have a detailed programme of that kind, for instance, Parmigianino's *Madonna with the Long Neck*. I know of only one interpretation of that work that makes sense of its iconographical contents,⁴ which makes me sceptical about the kind of benevolent perspectivism suggested by the thesis of the inherent contestability of all interpretations.

On a more general level, different traditions tend to construe works of art in different ways, as Professor Sparshott reminds us—for instance, as symbolic structures, or expressions of the artist's experience, or as symptoms of the inner life of the artist, or as signs of the deep structure of bourgeois society. Sparshott suggests that all such approaches are workable and that none can invalidate the rest. Much though I appreciate the ecumenical spirit behind this proposal, I fear that a closer inquiry into the matter would disclose that some of the critical practices, however well they may function in practice, are founded on untenable philosophical assumptions, for example, about the nature of language and thinking. Or more often, perhaps, there are important gaps in the theories behind the practices with regard to such things as the nature of meaning and interpretation and conceptual competence and the relations between concepts and paradigms, and so on. (This applies, I think, to the various Marxist traditions, which stand badly in need of adequate accounts of meaning, with all that would follow from it.)

It is of course true that all works of art are works of meaning and are therefore open to interpretation. The difficulties we sometimes have in assigning plausible interpretations to some works of art and the difficulties

4. Ute Davitt-Asmus, "Zur Deutung von Parmigianinos *Madonna dal collo lungo*."

Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte 31, no. 1, 1968, 305–13.

philosophers notoriously encounter when trying to construct theories of meaning do not, however, imply that there is always room for different and supplementary interpretations. (Think of the interpretation of Michelangelo's *David* as a sculpture.) If there is any bite to my remarks so far, then it seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that the contestability of interpretation cannot be used to prop up the thesis of the inherent contestability of all works of art.