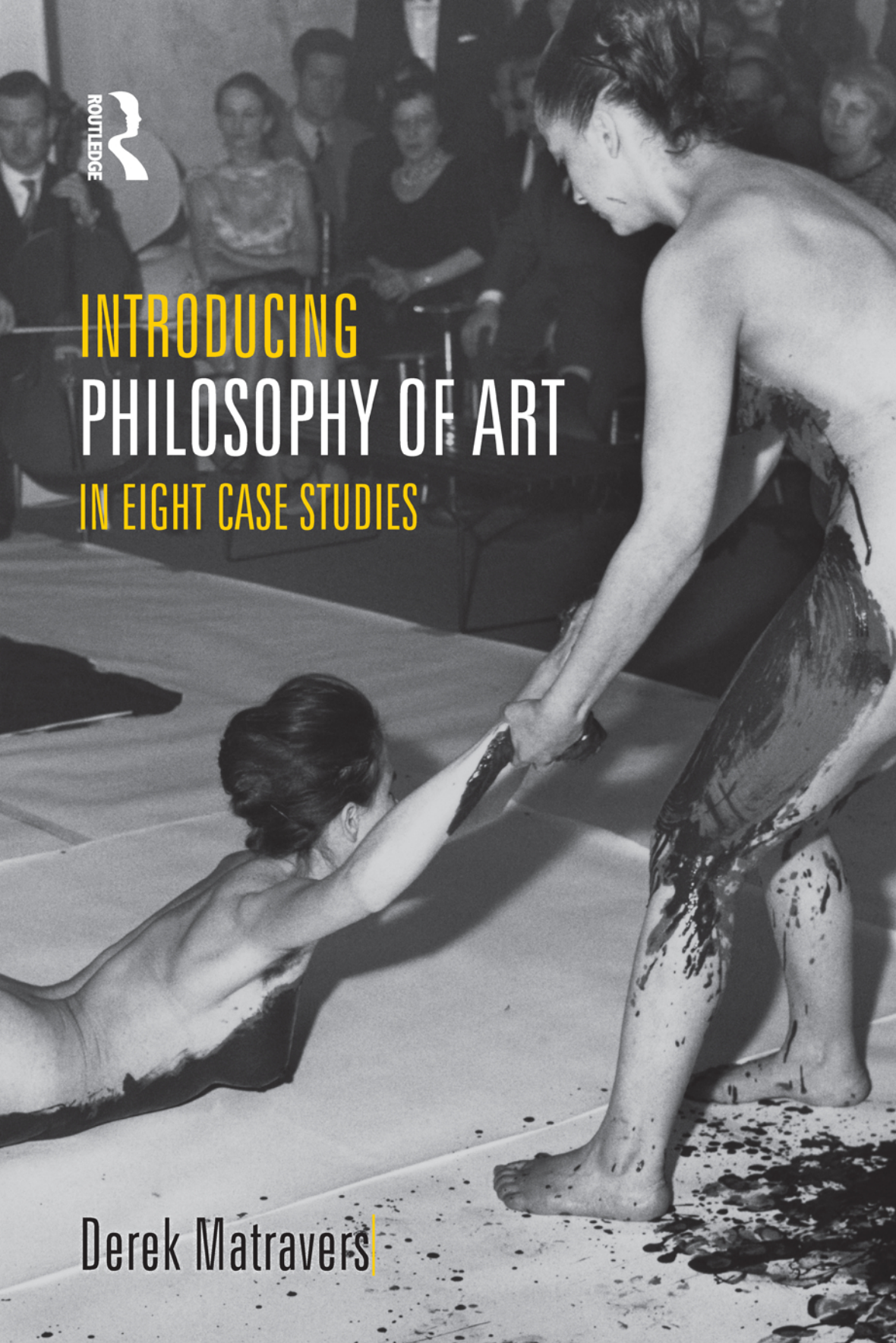
ROUTLEDGE
INTRODUCING
PHILOSOPHY OF ART
IN EIGHT CASE STUDIES
Derek Matravers

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# INTRODUCING PHILOSOPHY OF ART
## IN EIGHT CASE STUDIES

Derek Matravers

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*For Ed Winters and Vanessa Perry*

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Derek Matravers

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# INTRODUCTION

As philosophy is really just a matter of thinking deeply about things, and as art is one of the most fascinating things to think about, it is no surprise philosophers have things to say about art. In the past century or so, the list of things to think about in the arts seems to have multiplied. Largely unmodified objects such as urinals and beds appear to be art, as well as thoughts, lights that switch on and off, and walks in the countryside. This book aims to introduce eight debates in the philosophy of art through discussion of eight particular examples. Before launching into the first of these, I want to try to clarify what I am hoping to do in this book. First, I shall say something about the ambitions of the book. Second, I shall say something about the philosophical approach I shall be taking. Finally, I shall say something to distinguish the philosophy of art from other enquires that flourish in the same hedgerow.

What, then, of the book's scope? First, it does not attempt to cover all the arts. The focus will be on the visual arts rather than on music, or literature, or even architecture (if architecture is an art). There are complicated reasons for taking this narrow approach, some of which will be explored in Chapter 1. However, the basic reason is that the visual arts form some kind of unity; they have enough in common to give us something to discuss. The addition of music or literature makes it less likely that one will be able to come up with something that is true of everything under discussion. Second, I have not attempted to give an even-handed account of each of the philosophical theories currently on the table for each of the topics I shall discuss. Rather, I have been guided by the desire to reveal what I take to be fundamentally interesting about each topic: that is, to reveal what I think really is at issue and why it matters. As you will find, the faultlines of the problems are tracked by rival philosophical theories, so there will be plenty of those to

encounter. However, we will not encounter all of them. Those whose appetite is still undimmed can do their own research among the suggestions for further reading.

Our topic, the philosophy of art, is sometimes bracketed with another topic, aesthetics, to which it stands in a complicated relationship. The term "aesthetics" is derived from the Greek word *aisthanomai*, which means "I perceive". That is, "aesthetics" originally encompassed a whole range of issues to do with perception and consciousness. In the eighteenth century, the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten narrowed the term and used it to refer to a particular kind of perception: the perception of beauty. This usage quickly took hold and survives to this day. It may appear obvious that the discussion of art will lead quickly to the discussion of beauty; after all, plausibly, being beautiful is the aim and purpose of works of art. Even if this were true, the discussion of beauty would have to cover much else besides art. There are plenty of things that are beautiful that are not art, such as roses, sunsets and other natural objects. Indeed, the character of the link between art and beauty has been the subject of much fraught discussion. We shall encounter this discussion throughout the book with questions as to what it is to be a work of art (which I consider in Chapter 1); questions about the link between art and expression (Chapter 3); issues to do with forgeries (Chapter 4); matters to do with interpretation (Chapter 5); and the link between art and knowledge, and art and morality (Chapters 7 and 8). In each case, the link between art and beauty is contentious; indeed, it is frequently denied that there is a link at all. As I do not want to stack the deck in favour of any particular view, I shall follow tradition and use "aesthetics" as the broad term for discussions of beauty, and "the philosophy of art" as the broad term to cover problems that arise from our thinking about the arts. By distinguishing the terms in this manner, I can use them without presupposing the nature of the relation between art and beauty.

Philosophers do not have a monopoly in thinking about these issues. Those who think about art constitute a broad church, encompassing philosophers of art, art historians, art theorists, art critics and artists themselves. Someone picking up this book might be seduced into thinking that the approach taken herein is the only possible approach. This is far from the truth as the different disciplines approach thinking about art in different ways. What follows is a sketchy map of the territory, so that I can locate this book somewhere on that map.

It may surprise those who are new to the subject that philosophy is a fairly Balkanized discipline. One tradition in philosophy stems from the

eighteenth-century empiricists, and received a boost in the twentieth century from philosophers who were much influenced by logic and analysis such as Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore. Philosophy in this tradition is referred to as "analytic" or "Anglo-American" philosophy (I shall use the latter label). English-speaking philosophy departments, if they do philosophy of art at all, tend to follow the Anglo-American approach and this book is in the Anglo-American tradition. The label for philosophy that is done in the other tradition is "continental philosophy". This embraces traditions in German, French and other philosophies that may not have much in common with each other. As I write, it is the continental tradition that tends to dominate outside philosophy departments, particularly in the art schools. The nature of the distinction between the Anglo-American tradition and the continental tradition is much disputed, so any attempt to characterize it will be tendentious. I shall, rather pusillanimously, remain silent on the issue.

Although the book does follow the Anglo-American tradition, it is unusual in its detailed discussion of particular examples. The fact that philosophy is standardly pitched at a high level of abstraction, focusing on general truths, militates against focusing too much on examples. If one wants to say something abstract and general about all cars, then it will not do to focus too much on one particular car (one might end up saying something that is only true of *that* car). However, a detailed discussion of examples can perform a number of useful functions. First, it keeps the discussion grounded in problems that arise in the case of real works of art, which stops us straying too far into the philosophy dreamworld. Second, it can keep us honest in the sense of providing us with a touchstone against which to check some of the claims we are making. In 1914 Clive Bell wrote, in his book, *Art*, the following much ridiculed passage: "The starting-point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion. The objects that provoke this emotion we call works of art. All sensitive people agree that there is a peculiar emotion provoked by works of art" (Bell 1928: 6).

What provoked readers of this passage was the appeal to "all sensitive people". This gave the impression that Bell was talking to himself and his coterie of aesthetes who were revelling in this "peculiar emotion", and those of us who are a stranger to it are by definition not sensitive. There is something to this criticism of Bell; at least, he does little to dispel it in other parts of his book. On the other hand, there is also something to Bell's view. Art (at least, most art) is bound up with experience; we are familiar with the pleasure (or with other sorts of value) that works of art can give us (we shall explore more of this in Chapter 2). Familiarity, however, is not understanding. One role for

philosophy is to throw what light it can on the kinds of experiences these are: to make us conscious of, and reflective about, our everyday experiences. This way of putting the matter brings out the point at issue; we need to be familiar with these experiences in order to know whether what the philosopher is claiming makes sense. We will not know if someone has really explained what it is to access the value of art through experience if we are totally unfamiliar with that experience. It might not be, as Bell claims, "the starting point for all systems of aesthetics", but unless we know what engaging with art is like, we will not know whether what philosophers say about engaging with art is right. The second reason to engage with particular artworks, then, is to remind ourselves of what it is we are seeking to explain.

So much for the ambitions of this book and the approach it takes; what of the similarities and differences between philosophy and the cognate disciplines that also enquire into the arts? As none of these disciplines is particularly well defined, the similarities and differences will not be very specific. However, there does seem to be at least one characteristic area of difference that it might be worth saying a little about now as it will return several times in the chapters to come: the attitude to history or, more generally, the passing of time.

I shall illustrate this by drawing an analogy between producing a work of art and contributing to a conversation. What is it to understand a contribution to a conversation? One set of features of the contribution we might examine fall under the label "contextual". By examining what was said immediately before the contribution we can explain why the contribution had the form it did. We can also judge the value of the contribution's effect on the conversation. Was it an interesting response to what had just been said? Did it serve to take the conversation on in an interesting direction? Another set of features we might understand fall under the label "acontextual". These features are independent of the effect on the conversation. Instead, they are features the contribution has independent of the particular time and place at which it was made. These might be the internal features of the contribution (the relation between the form of the sentence and its content), the balance of the language that makes up the contribution, or such matters as the use of linguistic tropes or imagery. Acontextual features are likely to play a greater part in understanding a contribution to a conversation if that conversation is not going anywhere: that is, if people are simply talking, without really worrying about responding to each other or trying to argue to a point.

The question to consider is whether, when it comes to works of art, we should be contextualist or acontextualist. (The question is complicated by the

fact that there are two sorts of contextualist, but I shall deal with that presently.) That is, in discussing a work of art, should we look at it in relation to the society in which it was produced and the ideas of its time, or should we extract it from that context and look at it (for want of a better way of putting it) "on its own terms". Art historians tend to be contextualist; indeed, that is what makes them art *historians*. Philosophers also recognize the need for contextual understanding. The questions "What is art?", "What is the value of art?" and "What does this work of art mean?" all require, at least to an extent, contextual understanding (I shall argue this in Chapters 1, 2 and 5, respectively). The focus of interest of philosophy, however, is not on contextual features. It is in the nature of philosophy to stand back from particular enquiries and ask general questions. This is not to say that philosophy limits itself to acontextual features; rather, it is one task of philosophy to ask acontextual questions about contextual features. To revert to the analogy, it asks questions such as: "What *is* a contribution to a conversation?", "What would make a contribution to a conversation interesting?" and "What is it for a conversation to go in an interesting direction?" These questions are general and thus not about particular contributions made in particular contexts. That is, they are not contextual or historical questions; rather, they ask acontextual questions about contextual features. They attempt to throw light on certain important concepts, including the concept of "a contribution" and the concept of "the interesting".

Answering these conceptual questions (i.e. acontextual questions about contextual features) may require that we bring in acontextual features. Among what makes a contribution to a conversation interesting might be a feature (the relation between the form of the sentence and its content, for example) that would make *any* contribution to a conversation, considered independently of the context of its utterance, interesting. Hence, while art historians (at least, when operating as historians) tend to focus on the contextual features of a work, philosophers of art tend to focus on acontextual questions about contextual features, and also on acontextual features.

The analogy is fairly rough but, I think, helpful. I said above that there were two sorts of contextualist. I have characterized the historian as someone who, in attempting to understand a contribution to a conversation, focuses on its contextual features. Historical enquiry need not be limited to contributions made at any particular time; all that is required is that when it picks on a contribution to study, it studies the contextual features of that contribution. However, there is another sort of contextualist: someone whose focus is on contributions to the *current* conversation. That is, someone who is interested in where the conversation is *now*, and what the best contribution would be

*at the moment*. I shall call the art-world analogue of such a person – rather stipulatively – an art theorist. The boundary between the art theorist and the artist is not fixed; both are involved in thinking about the nature of contemporary art practice.

As I have described it, the roles of the philosopher, the art historian and the art theorist need not conflict (furthermore, a single individual can occupy more than one role). In a celebrated quotation, the American abstract painter Barnett Newman said, "Aesthetics is to artists what ornithology is to birds". Although Newman might have intended his comment to be dismissive, I think his characterization is accurate and informative. Thinking theoretically about art is not practising art any more than observing birds is practising being a bird. However, a focus on understanding contemporary art practice has led some art theorists to be sceptical of acontextual approaches, and hence sceptical about the value of philosophical approaches to art (whether that approach is one of being acontextualist about contextual features or simply being acontextualist). My view is that this is one of the reasons why philosophy these days has so little impact in art schools. I shall conclude this introduction by examining one particularly influential art theorist who is sceptical of the kind of philosophy I have been describing, in order to see if there is anything that should prompt us to rethink our approach.

In a recent book that has been very influential in the contemporary teaching of art, Nicolas Bourriaud has laid down a challenge:

> Where do the misunderstandings surrounding 1990s art come from, if not a theoretical discourse complete with shortcomings? An overwhelming majority of critics and philosophers are reluctant to come to grips with contemporary practices. So these remain essentially unreadable, as their originality and their relevance cannot be perceived by analysing them on the basis of problems either solved or unresolved by previous generations. (Bourriaud 2002: 7)

Bourriaud's claim is that the theoretical discourse surrounding the arts is inadequate to understand "contemporary practices". Bourriaud calls the kind of art he favours "relational aesthetics" or "participatory art". It is exemplified in the following work by an artist he discusses in some detail: Rirkrit Tiravanija.

> A metal gondola encloses a gas ring that is lit, keeping a large bowl of water on the boil. Camping gear is scattered around the gondola in no

> particular order. Stacked against the wall are cardboard boxes, most of them open, containing dehydrated Chinese soups which visitors are free to add the boiling water to and eat. (*Ibid*.: 25)

That is, what Tiravanija's "work of art" consists of is food being made available and shared. Bourriaud has a particular view about where art (or at least art that matters) is now. Instead of artists being based in studios and producing objects, artists are part of "the socio-economic arena" and focus on "producing relationships with the world" (*ibid*.: 68). Art has moved on. These days, an artist cooks a meal or runs a cafe rather than produce an object. Bourriaud puts the point as follows: "the artist sets his sights more and more clearly on the relations that his work will create among his public, and on the invention of models of sociability" (*ibid*.: 28). Although (I assume) Bourriaud does not think there is anything wrong in the approach art history and philosophy take to understanding *past* art, he thinks their approach is unsuited to understanding *contemporary* art (or at least the art of the 1990s). Here is what he writes in his Glossary entry for the word "art":

> 1. General term describing a set of objects presented as part of a narrative known as *art history*. The narrative draws up the critical genealogy and discusses the issues raised by these objects, by way of three sub-sets: *painting, sculpture, architecture*.
> 2. Nowadays, the word "art" seems to be no more than a semantic leftover of this narrative, whose more accurate definition would read as follows: Art is an activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects. (*Ibid*.: 107)

In his first paragraph Bourriaud reverses what one might think of as the natural order of explanation. Instead of defining "art history" in terms of what it is a history of – that is, art – he defines "art"' in terms of "art history". Works of art are those objects that are connected together by the narrative of art history (we shall see a similar approach to the definition of "art" in Chapter 1). Let us put that aside as it is the second paragraph that is relevant to us here. Bourriaud implies that the narrative of art history has come to an end, and has left the word "art" as a "semantic leftover". Putting the point in my terms, Bourriaud's claim is that the acontextual questions philosophy has asked do not apply to contemporary art practice. If this is right then this book, considered as a *general* introduction to the philosophy of art, is