More on art is not a verb

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A lecture prompted by the Flinders University Art Museum exhibition ‘Art as a verb’ (14 Feb-26 April 2015), delivered at the Hetzel Lecture Theatre in the Institute Building, Adelaide, on 19 March 2015.

Explaining exhibitions like Art as a verb is difficult because objects are implicitly contrasted with processes in a puzzling way. I offered some remarks about this at the opening on 19 February, and I’m grateful to the exhibition’s sponsors for this opportunity to say some more about the problem.

To make a start: there have been at least four distinctly different stories about why some artefacts deserve to be more admired than others, and why their makers are entitled to special praise. The tellers of these tales have come up, successively, with what I shall call the ancient schtick, the modern schtick, the heretical schtick and the awful truth.

Because the awful truth doesn’t have a history it tries to jump the queue, and as its local spruiker I shall try to make it wait its turn.

This is roughly how it went.

The ancient schtick

In the beginning (to borrow a phrase) there was the ancient schtick. In most cultures and for most of recorded time there seem to have been two words equivalent respectively to ‘art’ and ‘artifice’ (or to ‘art’ and ‘skill’), between which there is an intuited difference that needs to be negotiated. They are used to refer to or to evoke or to name something that we recognise in artefacts, whether they are objects or processes. Some things have always been fairly uncontentiously judged by a majority of people to be more attractive and more valuable than others, and their authors have always been supposed to deserve more admiration than the general run of artificers because of their superior skills.

If words equivalent to ‘artist’ and ‘artisan’ are used mark this difference, the artful (and therefore best-rewarded) lawyers are those star performers who are able to get their clients off Scott free even when they are obviously guilty. The artful (and therefore best-rewarded) picture-painters are the ones who make the most persuasive likenesses of real people and the most lifelike images of imaginary things. All of these things are taken to be the products of purposefully exercised skills, but the title ‘artist’ is applied as a mark of admiration only to
those artificers whose skills are so elevated that most people find them hard to emulate.

An elaboration of this suggestion, moving the idea forward from the ancient toward the modern schtick, is that some artists’ skills are so giddily elevated that it would be not merely difficult for anyone else to imitate them, but impossible. We see here the emergence of one of the more familiar stories about genius.

**The modern schtick**

For white Australian boatpeople—if not for the Kalahari bush people or the Inuit—the modern schtick about artfulness had its cultural origins in the European renaissance. It owes most of the twaddle that passes for art theory nowadays mainly to the ruminations of eighteenth century philosophers. Very roughly: it had always been perfectly obvious that when the grounds of our admiration for preferred objects and processes are actually spelled out there often seems to be an important virtue that doesn’t attach straightforwardly to any identifiable useful or practical merit. We are talking about a virtue that seems to have nothing to do with comfortably fitting the foot or persuasively telling the bible story, or profitably selling the soap, or keeping out the rain.

It became increasingly tempting to identify this apparently free-floating ground of attractiveness in otherwise useful artefacts with the same virtuous quality as the one that has always been attributed to certain naturally occurring things. Butterflies’ wings, waving daffodils, the smiles of newborn infants and green tree frogs are typically cited. I’m not sure why cane toads and green slime miss out, but they do. *Beauty* is the name originally given to this quality.

In the case of artefacts, it became fashionable some five or six hundred years ago to attribute beauty mainly to a peculiarly privileged group of useful things. Notable among these were important and expensive buildings and statues of real and imaginary persons as well as instructive and morally uplifting wall paintings. Indeed, things of these sorts began to attract far more credit for being beautiful than they did for being useful. In this way a superior sort of artifice evolved, that was used to furnish a new cultural domain coming to be called *The Fine Arts*.

The philosophical case for distinguishing the fine arts from the coarse arts has always been obscure, and there were very rough edges to this emergent cultural practice. Generous appreciators continued to characterise the skilful makers of unusually seductive wheelbarrows or prosthetic limbs as artists. The question whether these exceptional artisans deserved to be further elevated, not merely to the status of *artists* but to even greater acclamation as *fine artists* wasn’t subjected to the pub test. What did it really matter?

Whether it mattered or not, it was the question that opened up the cultural lesion where the modern rot took hold. The philosophers moved in, and a distinctively modern schtick began to distinguish itself from the ancient schtick.
Battle became furious, on numerous fronts. For example: are works of fine art properly counted beautiful by virtue of their intrinsic, or formal, properties, so that a picture of Heaven qualifies as beautiful in just the same way as a peacock’s tail qualifies as beautiful? And if so, will there not be some risk of doctrinal self-contradiction involved in making a beautiful picture of Hell?

One way of dodging this dilemma was to speculate that works of fine art should be counted beautiful not by virtue of their formal of intrinsic properties but in a more relative and operational way, by virtue of their tendency to induce a distinctive sort of inner experience in appropriately sensitive human perceivers. And if that is so, then what sort of difference must there be between the inner experiences that are induced by encounters with naturally beautiful things and those inner experiences that are induced by artefacts? Shall we need to distinguish between the formal properties of an artefactual work and its intentional or purposefully inserted content, so that fine art works should be preferred both to coarse art works and to naturally occurring things on the basis of their uncanny unity of form and content?

And so on.

Without wading deeper into the intellectual midden called Philosophical Aesthetics, that became even less salubrious under the rubric of Art Theory, we can see that a consensus did emerge by the end of the nineteenth century. It went something like this. The ordinary-conversational concept of beauty is far too crude to handle a topic as delicate as the fine arts. Aestheticians will need to construct a more technically subtle expression that will fit us up in the way in which the cops allegedly fit up suspected crims, by drafting their confessions for them and by planting the evidence. As the new and improved alternative to the uncouthly gauche idea of beauty they settled on the concept of aesthetic value (complete with mystifying enzymes, antioxidants and 10% extra in the standard pack).

So the modern schtick began to sound like this. Works of art are artefacts in which aesthetic value is incarnated. In the radical version of this story things that are not works of art don’t have any aesthetic value in them at all. In the more moderate version other things might have some aesthetic value in them, but not enough to be worth bothering about. The incarnated presence of aesthetic value in a work of art—so the story continued—is authoritatively certifiable by sensitive individuals whose processes of introspection disclose to them the subjectively indubitable presence of an aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experiences allegedly differ recognisably from moral experiences, from near-death experiences, from amusement, from orgasm and from indigestion. They are also much more valuable than every inner experiences of every other sort. Aesthetic value turns out, almost miraculously, to be unlike (for example) moral virtue or political conviction in that it is worth an enormous amount of money.

According to the modern schtick, people who seek to appreciate the fine arts will need to forget about beauty. Aesthetic value is where it’s at. Any anxiety that might be privately felt about whether aesthetic value is encountered when
facing up to a pizza with everything can easily be dispelled. It is a question that will be reliably settled, through the courts if necessary, by the accredited agents of a social institution that would eventually come to be called The Artworld.

This mythology worked in perfect harmony with a financial investment industry that was evolving simultaneously, out of an originally amateurish trade in antiques and cultural collectables. Items of unusual cultural interest that are not considered to be works of art have, of course, always been attractive to collectors. I don’t know how much Nelson’s waistcoat is now worth, or John Fowler’s beam engine, or a Gutenberg bible. It must be a lot of money; but no matter how much we would need to pay to get hold of one its price would be totally blown away by an accredited work of art such as Jeff Koons’ Orange Balloon Dog, that changed hands recently for $58.4 million.

The awful truth is already pointing us toward a curiosity about our current situation, ahead of the history story. Because today’s artworld is so rapidly shedding its old social class and intellectual elitist affiliations, venturing into cyberspace and proliferating in demotic forms and media, one might have expected to see it falling apart. With the twitterati kneecapping the intelligentsia and cognoscenti whose authority is now parodied in the shallow joviality of the ABC’s ‘The Mix,’ one might have expected the artworld to be suffering a dilution of strength and concentration even greater than that of homeopathic medicine.

But it’s not happening. The reality is that an inexhaustible well of capital gushes up at the artworld’s centre, funding fresh acres of art museum space in roughly inverse proportion to the diminishing stock of agricultural land. Artists remain the exploitable producers of raw material; curators remain its packagers and—just as it is with Coles and Woolies—the market rules.

Although the story about nouns and verbs that I shall come to in a moment doesn’t turn on this observation, it is more than merely a grace note. Despite the misgivings of a few heretics, the modern schtick about aesthetic value persists. Why else would the uncontestedly proper place for such things as Orange Balloon Dog be in the temple-shaped Art Gallery of South Australia, whereas Issue No.1 of Superman Action Comic (worth only a paltry $3 million) is confidently assigned to the ethnographical museum next door?

The heretical schtick

Some of the artworld’s more adventurous pundits started to have misgivings about aspects of the modern schtick around half a century ago, and they set out to change the game. They began to spruik what I am calling the heretical schtick. They theorised that aesthetic value is not, after all, incarnated in works of art, except in the attenuated form of residual evidence like the moth holes in a sock. Its existential presence (so they began to theorise) is to be sought in the distinctive process by which artists make the things they make.
The hip way of putting this has been to say that works of art are things that have been arted. (I derive this awkwardly passive construction from a putatively active verb that would have to go like this: ‘I art; thou artest; he she or it arts; we, you and they art.’). Arting something seems to be conceived as a skill, analogous in some ways to stirring something or sandpapering something or knitting something, except for this: whereas all of us can acquire such pedestrian skills as knitting and sandpapering things, only artists command the skill of arting things.

There is almost nothing to be said for this idea; not even the fact that a lot of artists have been seduced by it. Its specious attractiveness (before we get to its crippling defects) is this. It points us back from the morass of the modern schtick toward the ancient verities. It rightly stresses the importance of skill, and directs our attention to what can be purposefully done. Unfortunately, it doesn’t direct our attention to the far greater significance of what can’t be purposefully done; which is where the art is.

So I shall mention two of the things that that are seriously wrong with the idea that art is a verb; without placing any reliance at all on the nit-picking of the dictionaries. Dictionaries don’t make the rules; they just try to find out what they are, and write them down.

First: the process of making something doesn’t contrast in the appropriate way with the thing that is being made. When a process is offered up for public appreciation it becomes an object of appraisal, like any other object. This is the simple point that actors, dancers and musicians have always understood. Offering up a process for appreciation in any of the sensory modes must be the oldest profession of all, no matter against what competition.

There seems to be a misunderstanding here for which I have myself been occasionally blamed; although I plead not guilty. Just 46 years ago I delivered a lecture called ‘Flight from the object,’ in which I was misunderstood to have contrasted processes with objects as if processes were not objects. Unfortunately, very few people read (or listen) all the way through to the end of a lecture. I offered two concluding principles, one of which I called The Principle of Publicity. It went like this:

Whatever the artist, as such, makes or does should be in principle a public entity; because only that which is (in principle) available to anyone is capable of supporting a common language, a common understanding, a community of values.  

By trying to locate art, or aesthetic value, in the making process rather than in the product the heretical schtick just pushes the question of what art is one step back. Indeed, it pushes it back an infinity of steps, because we are entitled to ask whether there is an art of making the process of making a work of art, and whether there is an art of making the process of making the process of making a work of art … and so on.
The other extremely troublesome thing about a putative skill of arting is that the very idea that arting might be a skill is misconceived. Art is not something that can be made. It can only be found. Purposeful actions of arting are not merely impractical: they are inconceivable.

The awful truth

Which brings me to the awful truth, or to a bit of it that wouldn’t get many re-tweets even if it could be done in 140 characters.

The very idea of acting purposefully is the idea of acting in the expectation that an anticipated goal is likely to be achieved. This is an idea that can only be properly understood in the light of its contrast with the idea of displaying bodily movements or behaviours to which no anticipated goal is presently assignable. Let me explain.

Once upon a time (way back in the early nineteen-fifties, as a matter of fact) I sat at a waterside restaurant table in Greece. Like everyone else I was capable of displaying bodily movements to which no anticipated goal would have been assignable; as infant do, and adult victims of Tourette’s syndrome. I could also perform innumerable actions purposefully directed toward some anticipated goal. For example, I could purposefully, and more or less skilfully, perform the action of scaring away a seagull that threatened to steal my calamari by clapping my hands. The flight of the bird (whether it happened or not) would be the anticipated consequence by virtue of which onlookers would be able to correctly identify my hand-clapping behaviour as a purposeful action of seagull-scaring.

The purposeful action of bird-scaring was, of course, somehow related to the movement of clapping my hands; but I characterise this bodily movement neutrally as a behaviour, and not as an action, for the following reason. I knew very well at the time that in a different situation—for example when attending a musical concert—an appropriately-timed behaviour of hand-clapping would qualify me as the performer of a purposeful action of applauding the pianist. Under these circumstances nobody would mistakenly identify my purposeful action as that of scaring a seagull.

The innumerable performable actions (together with their related behaviours) that we all have available within our repertoires, for use on the right occasion, might well be called memes. Moreover, there are always innumerable potentially viable memes that we don’t yet know about, and therefore can’t use. One such unanticipated meme became available to me on that day, as an epiphany. I clapped my hands, as the purposeful action of scaring a seagull, and lo and behold a waiter came running out from the kitchen to ask me for my order.

I concede that this was not such a grand epiphany as the revelation of Christ’s divinity to the Gentiles; but it was a revelation nevertheless. I had stumbled accidentally on a new meme. I had become capable, under the right circumstances, of purposefully doing something that I couldn’t purposefully have done on the previous day. It had been revealed to me that it is possible to perform
the purposeful action of summoning a waiter in a Greek restaurant by clapping one’s hands. My understanding of the world’s socially mediated regularities, and of the ways in which these regularities can be purposefully exploited, had been incrementally enlarged.

It may seem a trivial example, but its relevance to the concept of art is profound. *Art* is a matter of discovering actions that can thereafter be more or less skilfully performed; it is not a matter of performing them. There can’t be any such thing as a purposeful action of arting because the concept of art is rooted in discovery, not in the skilful performance of an action that has already been discovered.

There is, of course, art and art. Endless confusion springs from the artworld’s conflation of two radically different words, both of which are spelled a-r-t. Some artists are more interested in the *art* that might be found (which is one of these words) than they are in making works of *art* (which is the other word). When they are making works of art they are, metaphorically speaking, clapping their hands with the intention of scaring a seagull and getting lucky when, quite unexpectedly, a waiter comes running and the trick is repeatable. Bystanders can get lucky too, in a similar way, when they contemplate what artists do. If they do get lucky their good fortune may be related, but it is not *necessarily* related, to what the artists take themselves to be purposefully doing.

The awful truth about what art is does in the end rely on a few relatively simple facts. The modern schtick and its heretical variation are both blighted either by ignorance or by wilful blindness to the fact that two words, both of them spelled a-r-t, are being systematically conflated. We need to teach ourselves not to do this. We have successfully learnt to avoid conflating the two radically different words that are both spelled b-o-w. We almost never conflate the front end of a ship with the deferential respect shown by an Australian Prime Minister to an English Prince. Nor are we bemused by the possibility that a garden rake might be the deplorable person who is (according to the dictionary) ‘habituated to immoral conduct, particularly womanising.’ We should be no less clear about the difference between the art that matters a lot to us and the work of art that may be, and often is, artlessly trivial.

Artists are called artists because they make *works of art*. They can’t be called artists on the ground that they make *art* because making art is impossible. They are in command of intricately related and highly sophisticated skills within the institutional domain called ‘the artworld,’ that I once misleadingly characterised some years ago as the best game in town. They are often conflicted in their motivation, between an intuitive understanding that art can’t be made and the hair-raising demands of a social institution that offers them qualified support and a flickering prospect of fame on condition that they pay lip-service to the mythology of aesthetic value.

The persistence of this doctrine explains why I no longer think that the artworld is the best game in town, despite the fact that it is run by people who are
often extremely well-informed, well-intentioned, and sometimes imaginatively
gifted.

When I speak dismissively about aesthetic value I don’t mean to insist that
there is absolutely no such thing; despite having spent a lifetime unsuccessfully
trying to decode it. I confess that I still find the concept of beauty much easier to
manage. When somebody asks for consent to the opinion that a work of art is
beautiful my agreement is often spontaneous; whereas, when I’m invited to
consent to the opinion that it has aesthetic value I don’t know what to say. (This
used to be very troublesome in the days when I was an art critic, and it must
account for the outraged correspondence that my editors used to get from art
dealers).

So let me give aesthetic value the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps there is
such a thing, and (despite my own defects of sensibility) perhaps there are art
curators, art critics and art historians who recognise it in an authoritative way. The
point I am making is that if there is such a thing, and if it can be purposefully
made, then it can’t be identified with art.

Art is the name we give to the revelatory discovery of new memes; and
they come to us in every institutional flavour. They come in the form of moral
insights, of revised psychological or political or social convictions and as greater
or lesser epiphanies in every conceivable domain of human concern. If a
revelation of an aesthetic sort should occur (and how would I know?) why on
earth should it be regarded as the only thing that counts, whereas every other sort
of illumination counts for nothing?

The artworld is not, after all, the best game in town because, when the
chips are down, even its heretics run for cover under the shelter of the modern
schtick. They are not yet courageous enough to repudiate the doctrine that the
only thing that really matters about works of art is the aesthetic value on which
the investors in artworks are banking.

So, in summary: the exhibition called ‘Art as a verb’ is certainly
misoconceived, but there is a respect in which it doesn’t matter. The objects and the
processes that it offers up for our contemplation are often ingenious and
provocative, occasionally hideous, sometimes comical and usually entertaining.
They serve to keep artists updated about how the game is going and about what
they need to do next if they want to play in the limelight. But, more importantly
than all that, they offer to all of us a prospect that the real world may be
transfigured by a revelation of some unexpected way of understanding its
regularities, and of acting purposefully thereafter in ways that we had not
previously known to be possible.

Forget about beauty if you like, although that would be regrettable because,
as ideas go, it’s not all bad. Much better to forget about aesthetic value, that we
can very well do without. Move on.
Art as a verb at the Flinders University Art Museum & City Gallery, 14 February-16 April 2015.


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All of this material is set out, with more precision and in greater detail, in my book The awful truth about what art is (Artlink, Adelaide, 2008), and in numerous papers: notably ‘Art history?’ in History and Theory 43 (February 2004), 1-17.