Art is not a Verb

Some remarks to accompany the launch of the exhibition entitled Art as a verb, opening at the Flinders University Art Museum, 19 February 2015

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The artworld

I would like to reassure grammarians that art is not a verb; and to reassure the artworld that I nevertheless come to praise this exhibition, not to bury it.

The artworld has always been compromised, not by its prominence within the entertainment industry (of which it seems to be ashamed) but by its prominence within the investment industry (of which it doesn’t seem to be ashamed). It underwrites the cash value of works of art by certificating them, not merely as cultural collectables or antiques (which some of them certainly are), but as the incarnations of an ineffable virtue that it calls ‘aesthetic value.’ To this end it promotes an obfuscating battle of rhetorics in which all the combatants mistake for gospel truths assumptions that are either trivially true by definition or false as a matter fact.

One of these is the idea that their incarnation of ‘aesthetic value’ is what distinctively qualifies some things, and no other things, as works of art. The phrase ‘aesthetic value’ is elucidated as a more technical name for whatever-it-is that the rest of us are less carefully referring to when we talk about art. Its technical status turns on two bogus conditions. One is that what it refers to is incarnated in works of art by definition. To be a work of art just is to be a thing that incarnates aesthetic value. The other is that the incarnated presence of aesthetic value is only probatively detectable (i.e., in a way that the courts will recognise) by approved agents of the artworld such as celebrity critics, curators and art historians.

The title Art as a Verb suggests that this exhibition’s curators are apprehensive about some or all of this. To their credit, they take themselves to be making us a better offer. They are offering a heretical theory: namely, that aesthetic value is not, after all, incarnated in works of art. It is incarnated in the process of making works of art.

This is a proposal that has attracted many otherwise perfectly sensible artists, for the obvious reason. Just like all of us, they have been taught to use a word that is
spelled a-r-t (and pronounced ‘art’) as the collective name for *works of art*. Thus, *art collectors* are recognised as people who collect works of art, and *art galleries* are the places where works of art are displayed. Art is *that* stuff….

But there is an entirely different word, spelled and pronounced in the same way, that is *not* the collective name for works of art. It is a name for something much more general than works of art; something that we find not only in works of art but in the works of every domain of human interest: science, morality, politics and everywhere.

The claim that aesthetic value is not, after all, distinctively incarnated in works of art but in a distinctive way of making works of art is obviously going to be attractive to people who make works of art. But there are several things seriously wrong with it. One is that it conflates two radically different words; the word that collectively names works of art, and the word that names something elusive that isn’t located only in works of art.

And another thing: putting a *process* up for public contemplation in the hope that contemplators might find art in it, makes the process an object of public scrutiny just as a marble carving or an oil painting is an object of public scrutiny. Actors and dancers and musicians have always understood this perfectly simple point. Visual artists are not making a discovery; they are coming late to a party.

So, I’m saying two things. One is that there is no *necessary* connection between art and works of art The other is that the expression ‘aesthetic value’ is not a technically superior translation of *either* of the two words that we commonly use, both of them spelled a-r-t.

**More on processes**

The otherwise admirable catalogue is marred by a random conflation of these two homonymous words. For example: under the sub-title *Art can be useful* we read ‘The idea that *art* might be practical resonates through [this exhibition].’ But the authors obviously don’t expect us to read this passage as ‘… the idea that *art* might be practical… ’. They expect us to read it as ‘The idea that *works of art* might be practical resonates through [this exhibition].’

The idea that works of art may be practical is true, but it isn’t news. Popes and princes, marketeers of washing powder, red revolutionaries and passionate feminists have always exploited the practical utility of works of art. We are given the example of the Hi *Street Cleaning Event*, with the elucidation that ‘artists, dressed in laboratory coats, literally scrub the streets of Tokyo.’ By implication, *artist* street-scrubbers are not like the ordinary sanitary wage-earners. The difference is allegedly that artists know how to put the *art* into performances of street-scrubbing, without which these performances would not qualify as works of art. They do this, it seems, by purposefully infusing their street-scrubbing with some sort of sardonic or parodic commentary.
It is easy to show that this is nonsense. I shall generate a street-scrubbing work of art, bereft of commentary, before your very eyes. I nominate the performance of a group of perfectly ordinary street scrubbers, encounterable in Tokyo at 6:15 tomorrow morning. You will need to make your own travel arrangements to see it but there it is, available for contemplation just as a 1964 version of Duchamp’s 1913 store-bought snow shovel is available for your contemplation in the Museum of Modern Art. I offer it up as a work of art, without the least hint of sardonic or parodic or any other commentary.

I apologize if all this theory seems tedious; but the point is both profound and (thank goodness) quite simple. Works of art are things of a sort that can be purposefully made. Contrastingly, the art that really matters to us is not a thing of a sort that can be purposefully made. Art is stumbled upon as an unanticipated illumination: sometimes by an artist who is purposefully making a work of art; more often by a contemplative bystander with no necessary interest at all in what the artist was purposefully doing.

**What is the artworld for?**

So: If art is not, and can’t be, purposefully made, then what is the artworld for? This is not a rhetorical question. I have the answer.

The artworld is a domain of entertainment into which, by established convention, we are expected to venture in the hope of finding art. It is not a domain of entertainment such as greyhound racing, in which contemplators’ behaviour is usually otherwise motivated. The artworld offers up extraordinarily ingenious things that may be interesting for every imaginable reason and sort of reason. Contrary to its own habitual misrepresentation, works of art are not offered up to us by the artworld for an essentially aesthetic form of contemplation.

A radically open mode of contemplation is not at all like the narrowly institutional attention that we are conventionally expected to pay to the works presented to us by physicians, by tax accountants, by crash-repairers and life-insurance salespeople. (Which is not to say, of course, that Gina Rinehart’s tax returns couldn’t be fruitfully displayed in an art gallery, for contemplation as works of art).

So I commend this exhibition to you, not only as an occasionally bodice-ripping entertainment but also as evidence that, following a couple of centuries of evasion, the artworld really is trying belatedly to engage with the deep question about what art is.

Do not be put off by the sales pitch. Neither of the two words spelled a-r-t is a verb. Both of them are nouns. Moreover, the stuff that we invoke when we talk about the art of mathematics and the art of healing is not a verb either. We are not talking about a perfectible skill. We are talking about those unanticipated epiphanies that unexpectedly illuminate any domain of human interest whatsoever. We are talking about revelations that enable us to think, to feel and to
act purposefully in the world in ways that we had not previously known to be possible.

    Just one caveat. Not even the most startling epiphany is benign by virtue of its brilliance. Remember Alfred Nobel’s endless apology for the illumination he had, about how to turn nitro-glycerine into dynamite.