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Case Study: *Introducing Philosophy of Art in Eight Case Studies* by Derek Matravers

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ABSTRACT: In this review article, I present and discuss some theories and arguments which we can find in Derek Matravers's (2013) opinionated textbook on the philosophy of art. Textbook consists of an introduction and eight chapters, but only some of the most important claims are discussed: various theories and definitions of art, the notions of expression and value of art and artworks, as well as the question whether we can learn something from artworks, beside, of course, what is considered as artistic and aesthetic. A little more emphasize I gave on the notions of forgeries and on the concept of beauty in connection with the artworks.

KEYWORDS: Artistic value, artworks, beauty, definition of art, expression, forgeries, Matravers, philosophy of art.

This introduction into philosophy of art by Derek Matravers presents and considers some of the main philosophical problems about art and artworks in a novel, interesting and appropriate way (regarding that art is a philosophical object here): each chapter has one artwork as a *pictorial leitmotiv*¹ on which various philosophical arguments and theories are tested!

I may add that this is also “opinionated” textbook – Matravers presents some of his own views and arguments about certain problems of the philosophy of art and this gives me opportunity to say something what I would like

¹ Examples consist in seven paintings and one sculpture. Matravers explicitly says in the introduction “that focus will be on the visual arts, rather than on music, or literature, or even architecture (if architecture is an art).” Chapters are: 1. What is art? Yves Klein's *Anthropometries*; 2. The value of art: Lucian Freud's *Hotel Bedroom*; 3. Expression: Mark Rothko's *Black on Maroon*; 4. Forgeries, copies and variations: Gerhard Richter's *Dead 2*; 5. Intention and interpretation: Louise Bourgeois's *Maman*; 6. Beauty and ugliness: Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*; 7. Art and knowledge: Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*; 8. Art and morality: Balthus's *Therese Dreaming*.

to say about art on that basis, so I shall not, as may be usual, briefly present each and every theory and idea laid in his book, but I shall take some of the most interesting.

First chapter deals with the question “What is art?”. This question used to be one of the main philosophical concerns about the art. History of that question is rich with various answers and arguments in the search for a definition of art, or finding necessary and sufficient conditions to demarcate objects which are artworks from objects which are not. In difference from, for example, Carroll’s (1999) textbook, where details of various definitions and theories of “what is art” question are presented in many chapters, Matravers first offers a different and a new way: he confronts the “traditionalist” with the “radical”. “The traditionalist thinks that art is something like this: it takes skill to produce, it has to be worthwhile to experience, it has to be beautiful, and (possibly) it has to look like something⁽²⁾. The radical will probably grant that what the traditionalist thinks is art is in fact art, but argue for a broader definition: that something can be art if it challenges us, if it extends boundaries of art or, at the limit, if someone who is an artist, says that it is art” (Matravers 2013: 12). On that basis, not trying to reconcile these two views, or to try to defend one over the other, and after showing possible shortcomings of both, Matravers offers the opinion that we perhaps invented the term “art” twice! Perhaps that could be so, but it opens the following possibility for which I would stand.

If we accept that the term “art” is invented twice (or, perhaps, even more times), then the second time, if the meaning of the second term differs in meaning and sense from the first, it means that what it denotes the second time is not what it denotes the first time of its use. So, what is termed “art” the second time in fact is not art – at least not that what it used to be meant under that term before the second “invention” (under understanding of the meaning which had been given first). Or, there are two different activities (and likewise, objects, that belong to these different activities or categories) that are art₁ and art₂ but these activities, though may be in some respects similar, are very far from being activities in the same sense.

Discussing proposal of the so-called aesthetic definition of art (Matravers considers it as an extension of the traditionalist definition) which would go

² Just for the accuracy: Painting which Matravers took as an example, popularly called *Night Watch*, is not quite a good example for the notion of what it captures what world looks like, because it certainly does not represent the night watch. The right title of the Rembrandt’s piece is *The Parade of the Civic Guard under Captain F. Banning Cocq* (1642, now in Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). Whatever it does represent, and it seems that it has several layers of representation, happened during the day, and it is not an appearance of a night watch – see for example Bockemühl (2006: 49–57) and White (1984: 95–97). The false title *Night Watch* originated in 19th century.

approximately like this – that x is an artwork iff x is made with the intention that it elicits special kind of experience, namely aesthetic experience; it is said that “[t]his would exclude nature because nature was not made by anyone and so not intended to be a certain way by anyone” (Matravers 2013: 14). This is not correct. God created the universe, so God created the nature. Therefore, if God has an intention, besides creating the nature with the intention for nature to provide for the life of intelligent soul-having creatures as human beings are, that nature cause aesthetic experiences in human beings, then nature is an artwork also. It is an artwork created by God. So we can say that God is both an “engineer” and “artist”. But, of course, aesthetic definition could work well if we consider only human dwellings, because in that sense no human being had made the nature.

I am not inclined to defend “aesthetic definition” of art but I would like to say also the following. As Matravers presents, on the other hand, it could seem that such an aesthetic definition is too broad (Matravers 2013: 15) since it would include many objects that nobody would classify as art. For example, it will include good looking motorbikes, cars or some domestic apparatuses. But when we say that they are works of art we do not mean it literally. Toasters, refrigerators or motorbikes are not artworks. Still, how they look sometimes provokes a kind of experience of which we would say that it is “aesthetic experience”. So, what should we say? Matravers says that certain defender of such a definition could “bite the bullet” (a very desperate measure, indeed!), or to refine definition and to say that *primary* intention of an object is to elicit and cause aesthetic experience. Primary intention of a toaster is to toast the bread, of cars to move people and goods around. So they would not be artworks. But what about an appearance of a toaster or a car? It seems that it is not a primary function of an *appearance* of a toaster to toast the bread, but of the toaster as a whole. So, I would say that primary intention of an appearance of a good looking toaster or motorbike is to sell it better (because of that, good looking which provokes “aesthetic” experience has ultimate function in selling the good, but in proper art, provoking aesthetic experience is an end in itself; it is, in a way, ultimate).

On that basis we can perhaps say that *part* of an object can be an artwork, so design of a toaster can be an artwork and not the whole toaster – because primary function of a toaster is to toast the bread. This functionality is wrapped in something that is (perhaps) an artwork – so only part of that object, in metaphysical sense – just a apart of a toaster – is an artwork.

This idea could be, perhaps, also useful, even regardless of any definition of art, how to regard architecture. Buildings and houses have many functions – and the primary function is to enable people to live and work in them or to produce something or store goods. But buildings and houses also have an outer layers and are situated somewhere in space. Appearance of a building

is (sometimes, at least) made primarily with the intention to elicit aesthetic response, so this kind of primary intention for making an appearance of a building could make a building an artwork; better to say again that part of a building is an artwork – its appearance only, its outer layer, not its functionality and internal divisions according to functionality of that house or building, for example.

After discussing various implications of various theories and definitions of art, including Dickie's and Levinson's, who tried to "formalize" some kind of a modernist approach and then to apply it also to traditional concept of art (in order to embrace all art), so they come with what is known as "Institutional theory of art" and "Historical theory of art" respectively, Matravers concludes, agreeing with Lopes (2008, 2014), that perhaps searching for a ultimate definition of all art is fruitless and that more pay-off could be gained from considering some work or works and try to say to which *art form* they belong (if any) and in that way make sense of them.

In the second chapter, Matravers considers the notion of value in connection with art. Why the artworks are valuable for us or in what their value consists in? Things, generally, can have an instrumental value, when they serve to attain something beside them, or they can have an intrinsic value when they are considered themselves as an "end". So, in the case of painting, which Matravers considers, the right question about artistic value is, what is valuable in a painting *as a painting*. After considering painting as a source of information, as a kind of decoration of certain spaces (walls in rooms, restaurants etc.) and some other possibilities, showing that these are instrumental values of paintings, Matravers proposes (as he himself says, following Budd 1995) that real value of paintings *as paintings* lies in non-instrumental valuable experience of a painting, where the base of that experience is in an understanding of the painting (Matravers 2013: 41). Of course, one of the most important aspects of the experience of the painting is how it looks. But, according to Matravers, this is not all: according to how painting looks and what is, thus, depicted, we can describe it and give reasons for such a doing. Matravers's discussion shows that value of paintings, and value of artworks in general, is not an instrumental value, but "it is a non-instrumental value of the experience of the work that would be had by someone that understands the work" (Matravers 2013: 49). That sounds very much plausible, but just in passing (and, seemingly, from the point of view of the more "traditionalist" view of the art), I would like to pose question for much contemporary art. It seems to me that we can legitimately ask *whether* there is something, or even anything at all, for understanding?!

Take many modern and contemporary abstract paintings for example. When we look at abstract patches, we can see whatever we want or are associ-

ated by – and so do critics in fact many times when explaining abstract and contemporary art. There is no solid points on which we can test what we say when we describe amorphous patches of color or masses in contemporary abstract paintings and sculptures. We imagine that we see something in them and that they have some overt or hidden further sense and meaning, and many times it is not there, so there is no right understanding of contemporary paintings or sculptures. It is just, most of the time just (I dare to say, wrong), imagination. Take Carroll's (1999: 148) example that artists sometimes, in making their works, "make choices willy-nilly with no idea where they are headed ... because [they] [have] no sense at all where the work is going". If this is true description of how some works are made, then I would say that it is close to nothing; there should be no understanding of this "work" because there is literally nothing – so nothing is present for understanding. If a critic says that "work" is about F, then he does not understand it. Because it is not about F. It would not be about anything.

If it can be shown that for some works there is nothing to understand, then question arises whether there could be artworks with no value at all or are they in fact not artworks; does lacking of the right features deprives such "works" of the ontological status of art(works)? Well, I would say "yes" for such a case.

Chapter three deals with the notion of expression. The question is how artworks can be expressive, e.g. how can they contain, elicit or transfer feelings or emotional states. Artworks, like paintings, sculptures or musical compositions, etc., are, of course, not psychological subjects, so they cannot literally have (contain, or be in) emotional states. But many times we describe artworks, and it seems correctly, as being merry, joyful, mysterious, sad, threatening, hilarious etc. In what sense they are so, then? Matravers considers several possible answers. One possible answer is given by the so-called *arousalism*: we describe the paintings with certain emotional terms correctly, if and only if the standard viewer feels that emotion or feeling, upon contemplating and considering a painting with an appropriate understanding (Matravers 2013: 57). I think that sometimes precisely this is the case, but generally speaking, I agree that this answer will not do: as it is said, it is only *sometimes* the case; moreover, we describe the paintings (or other kinds of artworks) *themselves* (as objects) as hilarious or fearful or... etc., though we know that they are not literally such, but we still hold that there is something *in them* that makes them to be described as such, and we do not report just what real emotional state the viewer is in. The second possible answer also will not do because it goes like this: the standard viewer experiences the painting as resembling a person who, in standard circumstances, looks as if he or she is in a certain emotional state (Matravers 2013: 58). It won't do as a general answer because many paintings, for which we put some emotional

concepts in describing them, do not resemble persons at all, even if some of them contain depicted persons! Some finer graining should be given as Lopes (2005: chapter 2) helps clarifying the issues: if there are specifically depicted persons manifesting feelings or emotions, on a certain painting, we can attribute an expression to these depicted persons (*figure expression*); we can attribute an expression to the scene which is painted, at least partly, and not to the persons on this very same painting, if it contains persons (*scene expression*). Since there are paintings that are abstract and non-figurative, that depict neither persons nor scenes, there is an expression that we can attribute to overall design and surface (*design expression*). There can be some problems with these ways, as Lopes and Matravers warn,³ but even the very multiplicity of such different ascriptions show that there is no unique way of attributing an expression; so we have no satisfying general explanation and answer to our starting question. After considering a few other possibilities, showing that they, too, cannot give general answer, Matravers (2013: 63) concludes that there is no philosophically general answer to our question – in fact, question is the wrong one! There are many different ways what we do when we ascribe expressions to paintings and other artworks. I would like to add that I think, for one reason, that different ways of ascribing expressions to artworks stems from the relatively vague meanings of emotional terms. “Joy”, for example, as well as many other emotional states, can be felt in many different ways, even to the one and the same person. We are not joyful always in the same way, and do not feel it the same way, but still in many occasions we are correctly described as “joyful”. If we cannot say about ourselves in a precise and differentiating way what exactly it means when we describe ourselves in expressive manner, as beings who literally have and are in these emotional states, all difficulties for describing (art) *objects* as expressive, start here.

Chapter four discusses forgeries and duplicates. This is a very interesting subject both concerning art and the philosophy of art.⁴ Questions interesting for the philosophy of art about forgeries are not of moral nature (fraud is fraud, of course) but what kind of works are forgeries; do they have aesthetic properties at all; and if they do, what aesthetic or artistic properties they have, and do they have a(n) (artistic) value at all? Moreover, can copies and

³ Very good and nice examples, among others, are chosen: Bruegel's *The Gloomy Day* (1565) in which persons depicted are not at all gloomy, but just the atmosphere depicted seems so; van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows* (1890) – for example, you could never confront such a field and sky in reality; the main example of the chapter is Rothko's *Black on Maroon* (1958) which is non-figurative and abstract painting described by a critic David Sylvester as “intimate, repelling, menacing”. About these and other Bruegel's and van Gogh's paintings you may wish to consult Hagen & Hagen (2007) and Walther (2006).

⁴ For good art historical presentations about forgeries, copies and copying, see Hoving (1997) and Lenain (2011); collection of articles about philosophical problems of forgeries is Dutton (1983).

forgeries be valuable as originals? Forgeries are works which are presented as being of different maker than the actual maker; they are presented as having a different origin than the actual one. Forgeries can be of two kinds: they can be copies of existing works but presented as if they are originals; or they can be, in fact, new works, but done in the style and manner of a certain (famous) artist and presented as if they are originals of that artist and not of their actual maker. First of all, there is nothing wrong about copies if they are made for exercise or for the pleasure of the copyist and if they are claimed as being copies. But what is a relation between an exact copy and the original? Is the original always more valuable, more significant or can a copy have the same value as an original? Matravers asks us to imagine that in some place in the middle of the nowhere, people decide that from the sales of their local artist buy a machine which can (re)produce 100% exact copies of the master-works of great past masters. Copies will be exact to the smallest details (they will be perfect copies), they will be non-differentiable from the originals. Would they be worth as originals? Consider these two thoughts that aim to show that even exact copies would not be valuable as originals: in copying, a copy machine puts marks of the lines and colors on the board or canvas, and not an artist, as in a usual case of making a painting. The second thought, following the former, is that an artist makes something new when making an original painting, but copy (analytically!) is a copy of something already existing; and, starting from blank, the original finished work depends exactly on how it was made by its maker, though a copy depends on the mechanical process of reproduction. Regarding the first, Matravers points that the fact that original was in direct causal contact with an artist is only a mere historical connection with a maker and that it does not in the slightest change how the painting looks. Because how painting looks is its aesthetic and artistic value and because a perfect copy does not have a single difference in how it looks, compared to the original, perfect copy would be artistically valuable in the same way as an original. Regarding the second objection, Matravers retorts that a perfect copy also depends on how the maker of the original made the original – because a copy machine reproduces and makes a copy exactly (causally depending on) how the original looks and it looks that way because an artist made it so! So, copy depends also on how the maker made its original. Because of that, a perfect copy is no less valuable than the original: “What is of interest in the painting – the appearance – would also survive from copy to copy” (Matravers 2013: 76).

What about the forgeries which are not copies of existing works (and so in a way they are originals!) but purported to pose as being works of somebody else (but not of actual maker)? Can they be valuable as originals? After we discover that certain painting is a forgery, that very same painting stays the same in the way it looks as before. If we admired it, why we should stop ad-

miring it just because we put another label of the name of a maker, and nothing else (changed in the looks of the painting)? Matravers presents several possible responses of which I shall consider two most significant. Works of art are considered in relations one to another, so forgeries would be also considered in such a way. It means that they also influence how we consider the rest of the paintings in the world of art, and forgeries thus may distort our correct knowledge and points of view about the artist to which a forgery is attributed to, to entire styles or even the whole periods in the history of art. This is a reason why this second kind (they are often “pastiches”) of forgeries are, then, not valuable as originals, regardless of the way how they look (to audience). Though most of the time what is said will be true, I think that there is a possible case in which even such a kind of forgery can be as valuable as an original. We can imagine – because it is, first of all, logically possible – that a forger produced a work which would be produced exactly – 100 percent the same – by the artist in the past to which it is falsely attributed;⁵ or, if not exactly the same to the last detail, let’s say that forgery has and bears (all and) only those attributes, properties and means which would be used by the original artist. Let’s say that this work-forgery conforms perfectly to the style and *oeuvre* of the old master, period and style. Then nothing would be changed significantly in our understanding of this old master artist, the period in which he worked or his style. After all, that old master himself could have produced one more *Last Supper* or *Christ Blessing the Children*. I think it is better to have one more beautiful and good work than just a true cold fact that a painter A painted seven *Last Suppers* instead of eight for example. Of course, counting a forgery in this way would not be true to the (historical) facts, but it seems to me that we would have more valuable things in the world, which overrides in value the value of having exact truth about the history of art.

Beauty is a concept most tightly connected with the art. It is no easy to say what is beauty and what is beautiful, but we intuitively expect artworks to be beautiful. Rightly so, in my opinion. Matravers, in chapter six, after stating that ordinary language usage of “beautiful” is too unsystematic, offers that we should use the term “beautiful” (concerning art) for something “that presents pleasing experience that is valuable” (2013: 107). For the philosophy of art, question is then, whether something that does not have a pleasing appear-

⁵ Consider the following possible case: a forgery attributed to Tizian. It is logically possible that someone could make a painting which is in each and every detail such as it would be if Tizian himself had painted it – so it would be better to have at least one more such (excellent and beautiful) painting in the world even if it is forged, than we have true Tizians. We would have more beautiful and valuable things in the world because it would be certain that people would enjoy one painting more and nothing would be distorted about real Tizian’s style, *oeuvre*, manner, etc. Of course, it is not that the more, the better, in each case (more wars, for example would have been worse), but in the cases as such, it would be!

ance (and is perhaps ugly) nevertheless has a valuable appearance. Matravers would say that if this is possible, then that work nevertheless has “aesthetic merit”. He argues positively for such a standpoint and, as an example, he uses Bacon’s *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944, now in Tate Gallery, London) Without much argument, I admit, I would say that it is questionable whether works that are not beautiful, or at least “pretty”⁶ have aesthetic and artistic merit or whether they are artworks at all. Namely, I think that one of the functions of art or its intrinsic “ground” is exactly to present, whatever it presents, in a beautiful manner, or in as much pretty or beautiful manner it can. Surely there is no limit (except decency and morality) what art can take as an object or its content about what it would like to say something or present (in some way something), but the very nature of art is so, in my opinion, that even violent or cruel things can be presented in a “pretty” or beautiful way. If these things which are presented are by themselves (as real things or event in the world) unpleasant or ugly, why the (art)work which presents them should be unpleasant or ugly too? We witness that many violent (and so, in fact, ugly) scenes (throughout history of art) are presented in gracious and beautiful way without losing sense and meaning about what these works (their authors) would like to say about these objects or events. Just for an example take some paintings of Artemisia Gentileschi,⁷ but we can find many more examples. What I would like to say is that these examples, whatever they depict, they depict their contents more or less *beautifully* and they try always to extract something positively as a morals or “true meaning and a message” of that artwork, even from bad and ugly events they portray. So, it can be done without artworks being ugly as Bacon’s definitely are, not to mention some other (contemporary) artists or groups of artists. I am aware that it is still a long way from saying that lacking property of beauty, or even at least property of some kind of valuable prettiness, to show that this lacking perhaps would disqualify works from being artworks at all, but I would be prepared to go along this way.

Chapter seven considers the question whether art can deliver knowledge. The meaning of this question is, of course, whether art can deliver *new* knowledge, something that we did not know before we contemplated a certain artwork (and, of course, new knowledge apart from aesthetic, artistic and art historical matters). It seems that it can. Contemplating *Nighthawks*

⁶ Matravers says, and I agree, that there is a difference between works that are pretty and that are beautiful. Beautiful works have much more aesthetic value and aesthetic merit than works that are “merely” pretty. There is a kind of continuum between pretty and beautiful (see Matravers 2013: 105–17)

⁷ Paintings as *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1614–1620, now in Uffizi, Florence) or *Judith and her Maidservant* (1614, now in Palazzo Pitti, Florence).

(1942, now in Art Institute of Chicago), a painting by the American realist Edward Hopper, it is suggested that we can say, on the basis of the content of that painting, that the life in big cities is alienating and that bars may serve as refuges from the dark and unpleasant outside world (Matravers 2013: 118). But many would say that this kind of “knowledge” is only banal knowledge, it is a triviality and it is something we already knew before, and that art is not capable to provide beyond this kind of knowledge. Art is not capable to provide people with new beliefs in the sense as (factual) knowledge is, more or less, justified true belief. One answer is that perhaps art can “sharpen” our already acquired knowledge, if not capable to give new knowledge. But to be so, artworks should be reliable and trustworthy sources about worldly matters. Then, the question is what it means to say that we have to judge whether artworks are reliable and trustworthy in this sense. If we have these means, that would mean that we, again, already knew what the artwork in question would like to deliver as knowledge or if we can not judge its reliability, then the possibility of getting real new knowledge from artworks is in great jeopardy! But, artworks are not objects designed primarily to deliver knowledge in the sense we have of acquiring new knowledge from textbooks or from science. For artworks to be what they are and to be successful, they need to *appeal as works of art* (Matravers 2013: 119). But there is no link between the properties of the work for which they are appealing, and the truth (because knowledge is, as is said above, more or less, justified true belief, so truth should be tracked). Sometimes they can be linked, sometimes not. Perhaps artworks can deliver knowledge only in a secondary sense, as auxiliary devices – when we have a common system of symbols, means of representations etc., so these many elements can be combined in artworks, in many ways, but because they are common both to producers of art and their consumers, some combination that is never seen before can be “read off” and so some new knowledge (apart from artistic, aesthetic and art historical matters) can be gained because the system is known, as in a natural language. Or, someone has to tell first something about the artwork to catch its full content and meaning and then it can, perhaps, teach us something new. Of course, this would then be only instrumental property or value of an artwork.

But I would agree that artworks are not objects designed to deliver *new knowledge* just by themselves and that they are mostly incapable of doing that just by themselves – but this is not any kind of fault for artworks.

For a brief conclusion I would like to say that as a textbook, Matravers’s book is, no doubt, overwhelmingly useful, but, as I hope that this review testifies, we can also find many innovative proposals for serious further discussion about the important matters concerning art and the philosophy of art.⁸

⁸ I would like to thank the Library Committee of the Institute of Philosophy, Zagreb, as well as Branko and Renata Pečnjak.

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