

The Fine Art of Social Distinction

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1. Introduction

The artworld has received a fair share of philosophical attention in the past fifty years. And yet, an important dimension of it has been left largely unexamined by philosophers. The dimension in question is the artworld's sanctioning of and reliance on social privilege. Considering how active philosophical aesthetics has kept, there are two plausible explanations for this apparent blind spot—philosophers either see the role of social privilege in the artworld as trivial and thus not worth investigating or they do not believe it is their business to do what they perceive as the work of art historians and sociologists. In what follows I attempt to show that the former is a failure of a narrowly philosophical character while the latter is one of disciplinary isolationism that betrays philosophy's own presumption of privilege.

My study is informed by the belief that the realities of social stratification bear directly on our relationship with art and, even more fundamentally, on the structure of aesthetic experience. The connection between social normativity and aesthetic normativity is reflexive. On the one hand, social privilege enables prevalent modes of art-making and aesthetic experience. On the other, art and beauty are part of the social currency that communicates and underwrites privilege. Even though these connections are sometimes assumed, they are rarely allotted the serious attention they deserve.

The aristocratic spirit of distinction, discernment and discrimination, anachronistic as it is in our ever more egalitarian global society, somehow survives in today's artworld as a positive value. While normativity is inescapably a part of the making and the enjoyment of art, the vestigial stratification that aristocratic normativity implies is an uneasy match for contemporary art's aspirational self-image.¹ The mechanisms that make this stratification possible are worth investigating for the benefit of both political and aesthetic awareness. If through a symbiotic pact art provides the emperor with a steady supply of new clothes, there is no sense in pretending that he is naked.

2. The Artist's Bind

The problem of privilege manifests itself most clearly in our embattled understanding of the artist. Historically, artists have been variously looked upon as transmitters of divine inspiration, agents of unbridled creativity, and unruly troublemakers. The one connecting thread has been the impression that artists are exempt from utilitarian constraints. While this does not directly address all aspects of social privilege—leisure, privacy, honor, capital etc.—it is fundamental for their manifestation. A classic formulation of the utilitarian exemption is Gadamer's remark that "the work of art refuses to be used in any way."² In the same breath he identifies the artist's peculiar position with the freedom "to do otherwise." It is impressive how persistent this image has been historically. Even the chain of inspiration in Plato's *Ion*, despite its tethering of the poet to a strict causal order, seems to allow for a type of freedom that the other professions do not enjoy.

A corollary to Plato's critique of the poet is that there is no particular skill associated with her creative output. This is significant because it dovetails with a seemingly unrelated breakthrough in the Renaissance—the recognition of the significance of artistic authorship in opposition to the anonymity of the traditional crafts. In his *Talking Prices*, Olav

Velthuis observes that it is at that time that “genius rather than craftsmanship, originality rather than expense, uniqueness rather than conformism” become the defining characteristics of artistic value.³ The same picture carries through to the birth, in the nineteenth century, of “the anti-bourgeois, bohemian artist” and the attendant “cult of the creative individual.”⁴ When, well into the twentieth century, Collingwood announces that “art is not a kind of craft,” it is partly a reaffirmation of a historical perception that seems too dominant for anyone to challenge.⁵ The art/craft binary is actually so deeply entrenched in our art-historical thinking that every discovery of a new creative medium is tempted to relegate previous art to the lower status of craft.⁶

Challenges are, however, built into this idea of unbridled artistic freedom. Alvin Toffler reminds us that for the first Puritans who crossed the Atlantic “work was sacred, idleness evil, and art, at best, a waste of ‘God’s precious time.’”⁷ The honorific exemption from utility seems to be, at least in this context, an ethical liability for the artist. But even in places where the exemption is praised, it does not hold up to careful scrutiny. In Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, for example, it is through the Dionysian abandon of artistic expression that “all the rigid, hostile barriers that necessity, caprice, or ‘impudent convention’ have fixed between man and man are broken.”⁸ The work of the artist here is portrayed as freeing but is it, at the same time, free? Considering art’s responsibility to strengthen “the union between man and man,” the fact that artistic creation abolishes the barriers of necessity does not mean that these barriers do not apply to the artist herself. In fact, there is every indication, in Nietzsche and elsewhere, that it is the work of the artist to facilitate some version of social communion.

This, in short, is the problem of artistic privilege—the social demand to epitomize freedom from utilitarian constraint presents itself as a utilitarian constraint. While the artist’s charge appears to be mostly symbolic—as Collingwood contends, the artist “is singular in his ability to take the initiative in expressing what all feel”—there are salient ethical and pragmatic dimensions to its solicitation and execution.⁹ William A. Guy’s taxonomy of “leading classes” from 1859 recognizes “an independent class, a professional class, a trading class, a working class, a dependent class, and a criminal class.”¹⁰

Which class the artist belongs to is not immediately clear. We can exclude the professional on account of its possible association with craft, and the trading and criminal classes due to their narrow specificity. The remaining choices are all compelling for different reasons—the working class, because art often enough involves effort and remuneration; the independent one, because of the traditional picture of creative freedom described above; the dependent class, because of art’s service to society and the insistent demand thereof. One way of sorting through the above choices is to cross-reference them with Beardsley’s list of the “inherent values of art.” Among them, there are at least two that seem to specify a social demand on artists—the development of “the ability to put oneself in the place of others” and the fostering of “mutual sympathy and understanding.”¹¹ There is, however, still a tension here between the possibility, as per Beardsley’s account, that art happens to be socially valuable and the alternative possibility that art is called upon to serve a particular social function. We cannot hope to resolve this tension without addressing the role of the artworld in harnessing and conferring artistic value.

3. The Artworld’s Sanction

In Marx’s discussion of the commodity fetish, concrete social relations between people assume “the fantastic form of a relation between things.”¹² This picture, seen in reverse, helps elucidate the paradoxical status of artistic production. Artworks are, indeed, fetishized as distillations and carriers of social relations. This does not have to fully sacrifice the classical picture of artistic freedom: in the contemporary artworld a version of this freedom remains intact—not as a faithful incarnation of the traditional honorific ideal but as a normative expedient in the larger economy that values and monetizes art. This does not amount to a resolution of the problem of privilege, but to a crafty transposition onto a broader context. The artworld, bound as it is by social and pecuniary demands, has a lot to gain symbolically and otherwise from the “normative assent” the image of artistic freedom represents.

The artworld aptly navigates between the interests of a select set of individuals and agencies on the one hand and the aspirations of the general public on the other. This world is comprised of collectors, curators, critics, artists and the various institutions—foundations, schools, galleries and museums—that connect them. Significantly, from any of these vantage points the general public is always seen as a separate entity. When, for example, artist and community builder Theaster Gates claims that art is a basic service, he suggests that while the general public is entitled to the benefits of artistic value, this value originates and is sanctioned elsewhere.

According to art historian Thomas Crow, the value of art in the past couple of centuries “has depended on scarcity and the persistence of some sort of aristocratic cachet.”¹³ To this he adds that “the pleasures of participation” in the artworld—including social access, assertion of superiority and collective indulgence—account for much of its attraction. While this is consistent with the understanding of art as an instrument of social cohesion, it also narrows the pool of its beneficiaries to a minimum. The aristocracy itself, of course, is not immune to the problem of privilege. According to Linda Nochlin, the reason there are no historical examples of artistic geniuses of noble origin is that the demand to maintain one’s social position amounts to a full-time occupation for what we incongruously identify as the leisure class.¹⁴ By Marx’s logic, and on the evidence of Crow’s account, the artworld’s function is primarily social—art itself being the commodified substitute for the actual social relations themselves. If this is true, it would be simply redundant for a person of privilege to also be an artist.

But why, one could ask, do we need art to reinforce our already existing modes of socialization? The simplest answer with reference to the artworld is that its rarefied circles need an ethical excuse for their apparent freedoms. The opportunity to co-opt the artist’s utility exemption redeems the aristocracy’s perceived ability to do what it wants. As we have seen above, this should not mean that people of privilege actually do what they want—for the maintenance of their social relevance, it is enough for them to look as if they do. It is important here to remember that artworks are not, and do not have to be, specifically designed to liberate the select few from their class guilt at the expense of the masses. In fact, as a vessel for the aspirational ideals of refinement and social mobility, art is just as apt at promising some manner of liberation to the general public, too. But the very structure of the artistic enterprise—a mode of production squeezed between the gifts of sensibility and the demands of privilege—renders it extraordinarily conservative. Instead of underwriting upward mobility, the promise of liberation ends up normalizing the status quo at its least socially inclusive. This is plentifully confirmed by Pierre Bourdieu in his superb book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. At the end of the day, art is much less of an emancipatory force than it is a function of “legitimizing social differences.”¹⁵

4. Philosophy’s Position

When it comes to issues of social privilege, any oversight on philosophers’ part risks complicity with the very parochial modes of social distinction they leave unaddressed. One paradigmatic case of such oversight is the handling of aesthetic sensibility. Starting with Aristotle, a certain simplicity has been attributed to the human capacity for figural recognition and imitation.¹⁶ And while on Aristotle’s account this low grade of aesthetic engagement is not normatively loaded, it allows for a scale of acculturation consistent with social privilege.¹⁷ By the time Beardsley acknowledges that aesthetic experience “refines perception and discrimination,” these markers of taste are already socially charged.¹⁸ To overcome one’s “instinct of imitation” becomes desirable because it allows for what Bourdieu identifies as “the shift from an art which imitates nature to an art which imitates art.”¹⁹ The refinement of sensibility that this shift requires is socially enabled and, in the artist’s case, socially harnessed.²⁰

One of the few philosophical critiques of social privilege from within aesthetics is Richard Shusterman’s article “*Of the Scandal of Taste: Social Privilege as Nature in the Aesthetic Theories of Hume and Kant*.” Since both Hume and Kant defend some version of naturalism in their accounts of taste, Shusterman sets out to show how essential, and thus detrimental,

assumptions of social conditioning are to the two respective theories. Sensibility is in focus here, too—as a prime factor in the dispensation and reinforcement of social privilege: “Good taste and refinement then become ineluctably differential terms and are thus irremediably elitist, since they require for their continued meaning that they continually differentiate themselves from what is less refined or more common.”²¹ While I salute Shusterman’s choice of topic and the important conclusions he draws, it is clear that both can benefit from further investigation. The question, for example, of the artist’s role, as I have broached it above, will be an interesting one to attack in the context of Shusterman’s critique. Considering how deeply under Hume’s and Kant’s spell philosophical aesthetics still is, it is a matter of philosophical responsibility to follow through with the promising avenues new readings of these thinkers afford us.

Some more recent critiques provide interesting directions for further philosophical investigation. One of them, specifically targeted at continental aesthetics, is leveled by Robin James. James’ study confirms the urgency of the problem I have outlined in the context of race, gender and sexuality.²² Her conclusion is that the discomfort of apprehending the systemic iniquities of our aesthetic engagements is only matched by the embarrassment of belonging to a scholarly community that ignores its own position of privilege. And while she does not focus on art and the artworld specifically, James’ arguments provide the template for what could be a meaningful crosspollination of philosophical concerns. A similar opportunity emerges from Eileen John’s recent article “Beauty, Interest, and Autonomy.”²³ She shows how fragile the autonomy of aesthetic judgment is against the social pressures of aesthetic appreciation and taste. Considering the various obstacles to artistic autonomy I have broached above, John’s work presents yet another possible angle for the reconsideration of the artist’s work, its reception, and the embattled privilege therein. Philosophical aesthetics most obviously has the tools to make these important clarifications happen—all it needs is the same interest and commitment that it has displayed in the more traditional precincts of its disciplinary domain.

1. In his “Art Contemporary Of Itself,” Jean Baudrillard discusses the tension between older modes of social stratification and the largely futile oppositional push towards a democratization of the contemporary artworld. See Jean Baudrillard, “Art Contemporary Of Itself,” in *The Conspiracy of Art*, ed. Sylvere Lotringer, tr. Ames Hodges (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005), p. 92.
2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Play of Art,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, tr. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 126.
3. Olav Velthuis, *Talking Prices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 121.
4. Velthuis, *Talking Prices*, p. 122.
5. Richard Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1938), p. 118.
6. Here is a passage in which Gregory Sholette discusses the replacement of older craft-based approaches to art-making by conceptual and digital ones: “What constitutes artistic production when artists abandon traditional craft skills to include the work of amateurs, incorporate mass-produced images and objects, or outsource the making of the work itself?... Conceptual art, and, most of all, the readymade has greatly upset this tidy assessment. The de-skilling of art has its corollary in the rise of digital technologies that allow even laptop-toting preteens to turn out sophisticated-looking aesthetic products.” (Gregory Sholette, “The State of the Union,” *Artforum* (April 2008): p. 182.)
7. Alvin Toffler, *The Culture Consumers: A Study of Art and Influence in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1964), p. 13.
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, Tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 37.
9. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, p. 118.

10. William A. Guy, "On the Duration of Life as Affected by the Pursuits of Literature, Science and Art: with a Summary View of the Duration of Life among the Upper and Middle Classes of Society," *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 22:3 (1859): p. 355.
11. Since my interest here is in artistic value, I do not endorse Beardsley's conflation of it with aesthetic value. The features of art I have singled out are such that their relevance does not stand or fall on Beardsley's conflation. See Monroe Beardsley, "The Arts in the Life of Man," in *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, eds. A. Neill and A. Ridley (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1995), pp. 549-51.
12. Karl Marx, *The Capital*, ed. D. McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 43.
13. Thomas Crow, "Historical Returns," *Art Forum* (April 2008): p. 295.
14. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," in *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, eds. A. Neill and A. Ridley (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1995), p. 561.
15. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, tr. R. Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 7.
16. Aristotle, *Poetics*, tr. S.H. Butcher (London: MacMillan & Co, 1902), p. 15.
17. This is one of the implications of Dominic McIver Lopes' "Aesthetic Experts, Guides to Value." In this essay Lopes advocates for the democratization of our notion of aesthetic expertise along a spectrum of "diverse aesthetic acts" that accommodates the significance of "low-watt luminaries" along with Humean "true judges." While Lopes does not focus on social privilege explicitly, his spectrum admits of the importance of social phenomena – culture, locality, social standing etc. – for aesthetic production and appreciation. See Dominic McIver Lopes, "Aesthetic Experts, Guides to Value," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73:3 (2015): 235-246.
18. Beardsley, "The Arts in the Life of Man," p. 550.
19. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, p. 7.
20. This social dimension of aesthetic sensibility is still mostly marginalized by philosophical aesthetics, as evident in David Weissman's recent monograph *Sensibility and the Sublime*. See David Weissman, *Sensibility and the Sublime* (Heusenstamm: Ontos Verlag, 2012).
21. Richard Shusterman, "Of the Scandal of Taste: Social Privilege as Nature in the Aesthetic Theories of Hume and Kant," *The Philosophical Forum* 20:3 (1989): p. 226.
22. Robin James, "Oppression, Privilege, and Aesthetics: The Use of the Aesthetic in Theories of Race, Gender, and Sexuality, and the Role of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Philosophical Aesthetics," *Philosophy Compass* 8:2 (2013): 101-116.
23. Eileen John, "Beauty, Interest, and Autonomy," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70:2 (2012): 193-202.