

Studies in Material Thinking



Faculty of Design and
Creative Technologies
Auckland University of Technology
Auckland 1142, New Zealand

Eml info@materialthinking.org
Web www.materialthinking.org

Volume 08 Experimental Arts

Experimental Art

Donald Brook

Abstract: Attention is drawn to the fact that the inscription “art” is a homonym. Primarily, it names the category of memetic innovation, illustrations of which are encountered in every cultural domain. Thus, art may be—but is not necessarily—encountered in the artworld, where a different word with the same spelling is used to name the class of artefacts recognised as works of art. The expression “memetic innovation” is explained in terms of a theory of cultural evolution, set out in a way that precisely parallels the Darwinian account of biological evolution. As a consequence, the expression “experimental art” is shown to be tautological. That is to say, experimental art is not a sort of art but the only sort of art. Because art is always unexpectedly encountered in works of art (as it is in artefacts of every other sort) it follows that such encounters are not and cannot be predictably contrived by an artist. Only familiar memes can be purposefully deployed. Some implications of these fundamental points are briefly sketched; notably the attraction toward science and technology that has been felt by many ambitious artists. My account of art, evolution and cultural history has already appeared in print in several places.¹ It is summarized here in order to distinguish the lucid tautology “experimental art” from the barely intelligible locutions “works of experimental art” and “experimental works of art”.

Keywords: Cultural evolution, experimental art, meme, aesthetics, art and science, art and technology

STUDIES IN MATERIAL THINKING

<http://www.materialthinking.org>

ISSN: 1177-6234

Auckland University of Technology

First published in April 2007, Auckland, New Zealand.

Copyright © Studies in Material Thinking and the author.

All rights reserved. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the applicable copyright legislation, no part of this work may be reproduced by any process without written permission from the publisher or author. For permissions and other inquiries, please contact the Editor at <materialthinking@aut.ac.nz>

STUDIES IN MATERIAL THINKING is a peer-reviewed research journal supported by an International Editorial Advisory Group and is listed in the Australian ERA 2012 Journal List (Excellence in Research for Australia).

Author(s)

Donald Brook /
Emeritus Professor of Visual Arts /
Flinders University /
d.brook@internode.on.net

“Art” Is A Homonym

The foundational point on which all “art theory” turns is that the artworld is bemused by a deceptive pair of words with identical spelling, as *a-r-t*. Homonymic words are rarely so troublesome as this. The temptation to consider depositing one’s savings in a bank whereon the wild thyme grows is easily resistible. Only in the artworld are two identically spelled but entirely different words conflated, not just occasionally and innocently but often—as it seems—even wilfully.

One of these words is the collective name for the class of works of art (comprising paintings, sculptures, poems, symphonies, etc.). Art galleries are places where typical items from the class of works of art are displayed so that people may go there, as we casually say, “to look at art”. On this understanding works of art are examples or instances of art, and all other things—marsupial mice, hire-purchase contracts, centrifugal sludge pumps and so on—are not examples or instances of art.

The other, identically spelled, word is the one we use when we talk about the art of mathematics, the art of marriage counselling and the art of motor cycle maintenance. The denotation of this other word is notoriously hard to fix, but it most certainly does not name a specifiable class of artefacts. It is nevertheless a fundamentally important word because without it we could not make the strong categorical contrast we need if we are to distinguish between art and “mere” skill or craftsmanship no matter how refined this skill may be, or how much admired.

Art is something that people can’t be taught to make, in the way in which all but a few incompetents can be taught to make filo pastry. Unlike a skill, art is not something that people can get better at making by studying a textbook or by practising for sixteen hours a day. Art is unexpected. It takes us by surprise, and it does so in every domain of cultural life including, sometimes, when contemplating works of art.

Much the more important of these two words is the one we use to invoke the art that is as influentially manifest in the worlds of politics, morality, cosmology and trauma counselling as it is in the artworld. The artworld is a modern cultural domain in which a self-serving conflation of these very different words was an intellectual frolic of the Enlightenment. A figment of the philosophical imagination called “the aesthetic” was given the role of welding them together so seamlessly that they might as well be one. *Aesthetics: The Philosophy of Art²* became the generic title or topic-heading in a lush new field of scholarship.

This folly of miscegenation was first seriously challenged (albeit in an intuitive way) by Marcel Duchamp early in the 20th century. Even some fifty years later, when the so-called *Institutional Theory of Art³* supervened over the traditional essentialisms, the exposure of the trick remained indistinct. Aesthetics are glutinous.

The Institutional Theory of Art is absolutely right about the way in which works of art are identified. Unfortunately, despite its name it gets no grip at all on the question of what art is. The Institutional Theory of Art is not a theory of *art*. What it correctly recognises is that *works of art* are whatever the artworld chooses to endorse as works of art, for whatever reason or for no reason. In much the same way, sacred sites are whatever a religious or quasi-religious institution chooses to endorse as sacred sites, for whatever reason or for no reason.

Art, on the other hand, is *not* whatever the artworld chooses to endorse as a work of art. Art is what it always was, long before there was a Western artworld with the socially constructed power to endorse the artefacts it favours as works of art.

There is insufficient time here and now to make the case on which the Institutional Theory



partly rests by showing why it is that the traditional essentialist theories all fail. Art is not Beauty or Aesthetic Goodness or Intuition-expression or Catharsis. It is not even Revelation (although Revelation comes closest to the mark). Art, as contrasted with craft, is *memetic innovation*. I shall try to suggest in a few words what this means and why it is that artists do not need to know this. (If possession of this knowledge had been a necessary condition for making works of art, then the great galleries of the world would be empty).

Some artists do show a serious interest in the question, but the small philosophical flame is easily extinguished, either by the smothering blanket of aesthetics or by the gale of rhetoric about what art is that blows from political ideologues and identity politicians.⁴

The Word “Evolution” Is Not A Homonym

The art that drives cultural evolution and shapes our lives in every cultural domain is much older than the artworld, and indeed older than any work of art. Without it *cultural kinds* could not have evolved, or—if they had appeared by magic—they would have persisted eternally unchanged like the animal species of Creationist fantasy. Cultural kinds, such as stone carving, would not have histories. It is *memetic innovation* that gives historical shape to cultural evolution, just as it is *genetic variation* that gives historical shape to biological evolution.

Unlike the inscription “art”, the inscription “evolution” is not homonymic. It is not even a word with a literal and a metaphorical sense. Cultural kinds like the aeroplane literally evolve, just as biological kinds like the bird literally evolve.

Let us consider first the Darwinian account of biological evolution.⁵ Living organisms present themselves in distinguishable kinds, or (as Darwin put it) “species,”⁶ each of which has its own distinctive evolutionary history. The emergence of each species, its persistence, its modifications and its final extinction are all lucidly explicable in the following way.

- (a) The genes responsible for generating the items of a biological kind are *replicated* (Although Darwin didn’t know it, the splitting of DNA is implicated here); and
- (b) the replication of genes is inexact, so that the genetically replicated items of a given kind are not identical; and
- (c) variant items of a kind are differentially well adapted to the changing environments in which they find themselves; and
- (d) those items that are best adapted to changing biological environments are most prolifically replicated.

This pattern is exactly paralleled by the evolution of cultural kinds, such as the wedding ceremony, the agricultural tractor and the Impressionist painting. Items of cultural kinds are perpetuated not by virtue of the *replication of genes* but by virtue of the *imitation of memes*. Here is the matching story about cultural kinds.

- (a) The memes responsible for generating the items of a cultural kind are *imitated* (mirror neurons are probably implicated here); and
- (b) the imitation of memes is inexact, so that memetically imitated items of a given kind are not identical; and
- (c) variant items of a kind are differentially well adapted to the changing environments in which they find themselves; and
- (d) those items that are best adapted to changing cultural environments are the most prolifically imitated.

In these explanatory stories (or *histories*) the role of the meme in culture corresponds exactly to that of the gene in biology. In this theoretical structure genes cannot themselves count as biological species but rather as instruments subject to accidental variation, by virtue of which biological species evolve. Meme theorists following Richard Dawkins usually get this wrong. When challenged to illustrate the meme they almost invariably offer such examples as catch-phrases or popular songs. But catch-phrases and popular songs are not memes. A popular song is an item of a distinctive cultural kind that has been generated by a concerted deploy-



ment of memes, just as a kangaroo is an item of a distinctive biological kind that has been generated by a concerted mobilisation of genes. No biologist would countenance holding up a kangaroo as an example of a gene.

Memes are not material objects. They are regularly efficacious *material actions*, purposefully performed with the intention of generating items of recognisable cultural kinds. Memes are *not* items of the kinds that are generated by performing these actions. A poached egg is not a meme. A poached egg is an item of a cultural kind that is generated by purposefully orchestrating an assembly of familiar memes such as lighting the gas, boiling water, cracking an egg, watching the clock; and so on.

A lot of theory compressed within this summary, from which one consideration stands out. Cultural evolution relies as crucially on the imperfect imitation of memes as biological evolution relies on the imperfect replication of genes. There would be no evolution in biology or in culture if there were no accidents, no mishaps, no incursions of the unexpected. The persistence of kinds depends upon the regular and predictable replication of genes and the imitative perpetuation of memes, but the historical shaping and changing of kinds is a consequence of the unexpected variations in biologically replicated genes and in culturally imitated memes.

An identification of art with the emergence of unintended but nevertheless opportunistically successful memes explains why cultural kinds have histories. Their recognizable persistence is explicable in one way; their historical shaping is explicable in a different way. Art and skill and art go hand in hand.

“Experiment” Has Two Senses

We come now to the word “experiment,” which is not clearly a homonym like “art,” although it does have two senses between which there is a significant difference.

The sense that matters to us in understanding art is the sense in which experimenters do not know what it is that they are expecting their activity to produce. This is the sense of “experiment” in which, as an eager child, I took my first chemistry set into the garage to perform experiments. There was an instruction book spelling out the familiar memes of chemistry, but I was too impatient to read it. I simply added some blue crystals to a yellowish fluid that I extracted from a bottle with a warning label. Nothing happened; but it might have done. I might have discovered how to make a more terrible smell or a bigger bang than I could have generated by exercising any of the memes reported in the book.

This is the sense of “experiment” in which the result—valuable though it might be—was not specifically intended. In the course of doing something that one does not know how to do such as boiling urine (to take a malodorous example), one discovers how to do something that one did not know how to do. I have in mind of course Joseph Wright’s revelatory picture *The alchemist in search of the philosopher’s stone discovers phosphorus* (1771). Following this epiphany, alchemists everywhere knew how to make phosphorus. A new meme had emerged.

The sense of the word “experiment” to which the craft of science attaches more weight is different. This is the sense in which an experimenter purposefully deploys familiar sets of memes with the expectation of generating results that will falsify (or fail to falsify) some theory or hypothesis. I apologise to those philosophers of science who have moved on since Popper, and say no more about this because it should at least be obvious that the mindset of the scientist, considered as a purposeful maker of scientific theories, is no different from that of the artist considered as a purposeful maker of works of art. They both know very well how to go about making recognisable items of their respective cultural kinds.

“Experimental Art” Is A Tautology

Several of these threads can be drawn together by saying that when we use the word “experiment” in the basic generative sense invoking the felicitous unexpectedness that we recognize as art, the expression “experimental art” is a tautology. In the sense of “experiment” in which the result of one’s activity is not anticipated, art *cannot but* be experimental. So: to say that a meme is new is to say that some action has unexpectedly acquired a regularly useful purpose. It is now known to yield a predictable result, and it is in principle repeatable



and imitable. It is fair comment to remark at this point that although the Revelation Theory of Art had its head in the clouds, its feet were always on the ground.

It is fatally easy to conflate the disorderly and accidental sense of “experimental” with the more disciplined one in which purposeful actions with anticipated outcomes are performed. This is why the claim that scientists are generally not trying to make art sounds sensible, whereas the claim that artists are generally not trying to make art sounds paradoxical. But it is not paradoxical at all. It is the awful truth. Artists are purposefully making *works of art*, and if they do not know how to do this there are plenty of misleadingly so called art schools available to them.

Conclusion

It should be plain from this analysis that the makers of works of art do not engage with science and technology under any logical constraint. Forty or fifty years ago we were captivated by the notion that artists who did not engage with the domains of science and technology could not be taken seriously. The argument was that these are the most conspicuous sites of cultural evolution. But the fact is that they are far indeed from being the only sites of cultural evolution. There is no reason whatsoever why works of art should not engage equally productively with any of the adjacent cultural domains of morality, or politics, or social justice or grocery retailing.

Two final points seem to be worth making, or making again. The first is that the expression “experimental art” does not describe a distinctive sort of art, contrasting with other sorts of art. Moreover, it may be worth remarking incidentally that—in a different way, because it is not a tautology but a catachresis—the expression “Australian art” does not describe a distinctive sort of art to contrast with other sorts of art. So called “art historians” (who are really historians of the various kinds of *works of art*) regularly conflate the expression “Australian art,” which is senseless, with the classificatory expression “Australian works of art.”

The second point is this. It is quite impossible to prescribe a way of making experimental works of art. In the relevant sense of “experimental” we are looking for outcomes that, because they are unexpected, cannot *in principle* be intentionally generated. Forty years ago we thought that submitting any object or process with a strong scientific or technological flavour to the artworld for endorsement as a work of art was enough to make it count as experimental because rejection was very much on the cards. “This is not a work of art,” the aesthetic pundits were very likely to say. “It’s just rubbish.”

By now it is well understood that an engagement with science and technology is no longer outrageous, even to the aesthetes. The artworld has capitulated, to the point that there is nothing whatsoever from which it can withhold its endorsement without attracting derision. So the problem for experimental artists has been pessimistically revised. They cannot (purposefully) make experimental *art* for the very best of reasons: it is impossible. Nor can they (purposefully) make experimental *works of art* in the sense that they do not know whether or not the things they are making will qualify as works of art now that the artworld has relinquished the power of rejection that it wielded so magisterially when Joseph Duveen and Bernard Berenson ran the operation.

What then is left? The easy bit is making works of art. The difficult bit is to make works of art in the way in which everyone should ideally do everything: opening open up our minds as we go to the astonishment of discovering new possibilities for regular action that we did not know were available to us until somebody or something unexpectedly showed us how.

Science and technology offer the artist some attractive territory for open-minded exploration, but there is nothing in the concept of art that makes it mandatory to go there. More pointedly: the idea that making works of art may be a sort of low-grade, generalised, way of doing science is perhaps beguiling; but it is wrong.



References

- Brook, D. (2004, February). Art history?. *History and Theory*, 43, 1-17.
- Brook, D. (2005). If Art has no history, what implications flow for the art museum?. *Rethinking History* 9(1), 71-90.
- Brook, D. (2007). For art, against aesthetics. In I. North (Ed.). *Visual Animals: crossovers, evolution and new aesthetics* (pp. 84-90). Adelaide: Contemporary Arts Centre of South Australia.
- Brook, D. (2008). *The awful truth about what art is*. Adelaide: *Artlink*.
- Brook, D. (2010). Muffled sounds: the eartrumpet of the artworld has been struck by lightning. *Artlink*, 30(2), 34-36.
- Beardsley, M. C. (1958). *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Endnotes

- ¹ See, for example: (2004, February) Art history?. *History and Theory*, 43, 1-17; (2005) If art has no history, what implications flow for the art museum?. *Rethinking History* 9(1), 71-90; (2007) For art, against aesthetics. In I. North (Ed.). *Visual Animals: crossovers, evolution and new aesthetics* (pp. 84-90). Adelaide: Contemporary Arts Centre of South Australia; (2008) *The awful truth about what art is*. Adelaide: *Artlink*, and (2010) Muffled sounds: the eartrumpet of the artworld has been struck by lightning. *Artlink*, 30(2), 34-36.
- ² Monroe C. Beardsley's *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (1958), for example, is still an influential text. The criticism he analyses is, of course, the criticism of *works of art*.
- ³ I refer to classic formulations such as those of George Dickie and Arthur Danto. Continental European equivalents emerged in the various "structuralist", "post-structuralist" and other inflections of so-called "French theory".
- ⁴ A recent change of name from the *Experimental Art Foundation* in Adelaide to the *Australian Experimental Art Foundation* reveals the insidious power of identity politics. The name *National Institute for Experimental Arts* adopted in Sydney is only marginally less compromising.
- ⁵ The story that elaborates what Daniel Dennett called the best idea that anybody ever had.
- ⁶ Biological kinds have complex taxonomies (e.g. kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus and species, according to Linnaeus), all of them compressed into "species" in general accounts of evolutionary theory. We do not yet have any comparably useful taxonomy of cultural kinds.



Donald Brook /
Emeritus Professor of Visual Arts /
Flinders University /
d.brook@internode.on.net

Donald Brook was one of the initiators of the Tin Sheds at Sydney University in the late nineteen-sixties, and founder of The Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide in 1974.

