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Eight Identical Paintings and Aesthetic Functionalism

From The Philosophy of Art by Stephen Davies, comes a particular theoretical yet practical scenario that may appear in the art world, or in the extension of art:

Imagine eight, identical-looking, seemingly abstract paintings that feature red and yellow swirls. One was carefully crafted by the artist to be as it is. In painting the second, the artist followed the instructions of a computer program that randomly specified what shapes and colors should be used on each part of the canvas. The third was painted by a chimpanzee. The fourth was the accidental byproduct of the work of a fifteenth-century portrait painter who used the small canvas as his color palette. The fifth is intended as a send-up of the work of a famous abstract painter. The sixth was done by a very young child, who says it represents people and animals. The seventh was the consequence of an explosion in a paint factory. The eighth is offered as a realistic depiction of a plate of cooked eggs and tomatoes that have been mixed together.

Obviously, such a scenario would pose such a problem. Are all of them even *artworks*, perhaps? Do they all have the same aesthetic properties and merit? Do they all have the same artistic properties?

We can deduce if these paintings are artworks through aesthetic functionalism. Aesthetic functionalism maintains that something is an artwork if it is intended to provide an aesthetic experience to a person who contemplates the art for art's sake, and solely appreciates the sensory dimension of the object.

The first painting, made to be "as it is", suggests that it is independent of any intention other than to simply exist. This omitting of any aesthetic purpose means that it is not an artwork. The second painting is a product of a random computer generation, and this removes the creative processes from the artist, effectively terminating his intentions of giving the viewer an aesthetic experience, so it is *not* an artwork. The third is said to be painted by a chimpanzee, whereby a chimpanzee does not have the same thought capacity as a human no matter how good a painter they may be, so thus it is difficult to say whether or not a chimpanzee even really has an artistic or aesthetic intention when painting, so it is difficult whether to say if the third is an artwork or not. The fourth is not even intended to be an artwork, so we can easily dismiss it.

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The fifth painting seems to be a different story, however, since the intent is to mock a famous abstract painter: since the painting seems to be intended to invoke a reaction, or in other words an aesthetic experience, we can say that the fifth painting could be an artwork. However, the fifth painting is referential to something--mere pleasurable contemplation does not exhaust the experience of this particular artwork, but rather it is impartial to the intent of the artist, who serves to mock a famous abstract painter.

The sixth could not be an artwork since its aesthetic experience is inextricably tied with symbolic elements that require cognition of the work's content. This means that, as an artwork whose meaning is separated from its aesthetic qualities, it cannot be an artwork under aesthetic functionalism. The seventh object is comparable to the fourth, where the intention of even being an art piece is completely amiss. The eighth, removed of any symbolic or referential content other than physical depictions of objects, may not be an artwork, since it serves only to be a depiction of food.

Since all of the eight objects are identical to one another, their "aesthetic properties", their properties that can be grasped using just the bare senses, i.e. the unity, simplicity, symmetry, asymmetry, order, and complexity of the art object, are identical too. This means that their aesthetic merit is identical. According to aestheticists, if there were two objects with identical properties, there is no way those two objects differ in artistic value. The artwork and its value is just *is* its aesthetic dimension. Either they're both artworks, or neither is. Understanding the context of creation is to think about the artwork and intellectualise it under the perception of additional knowledge, which is what the aestheticist avoids.

Lastly, it is evident from the context of their creation that they all have differing "artistic properties": that is to say, they all have differing properties that hitherto take thought in order to be grasped. Where the artwork begins and ends, to the aestheticist, is its sensory dimension. Its context of creation, such as its genre, style, and period of art, as well as the obstacles that the artist had to endure, as well as any religious or political significance, all count as artistic properties. All of this criteria is what makes each of the identical eight art objects bear unique artistic properties each. The third is said to be painted by a chimpanzee, so it is unlikely that this chimpanzee mixed their own paints and stretched their own canvas, then negotiated with an art appraiser with fiery elocution. The fourth and seventh object had accidental contexts of creation. The fifth painting may be a response to the height of popularity of a particular art figure. We can discuss these paintings' artistic properties through its context of creation. However, they do not bear any real effect on its sensory dimension. Titles, context of creations, referential or otherwise

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extra-contextual information may only serve to inform us, wherein the references are not readily embedded in the artwork.

Aesthetic theory serves to immerse the viewer in the immediate experience. This type of reception evaluates art based on a passive and receptive role instead of an active role in interpreting art.

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The aesthetic experience--Let the art wash over you