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### Journal Item

How to cite:

Matravers, Derek (2014). Art, knowledge, and virtue: comments on Alana Jelinek's This is Not Art. *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 13(3) pp. 169–177.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/14702029.2014.969925>

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Art, Knowledge, and Virtue: Comments on Alana Jelinek's *This Is Not Art*.

I am very grateful for the opportunity provided by the invitation to contribute to the special issue of this journal to discuss Jelinek's excellent and important book, *This is Not Art* (Jelinek 2013) (page numbers that are not otherwise referenced are to this book). The book contains several clear and bold theses. As is the convention in my discipline, I shall largely ignore those with which I agree, and focus on those with which I disagree. However, I do need to start with a warning. In the course of discussing disciplinarity Jelinek makes some sensible and sobering remarks:

The disciplines tussle for authority, assuming the supremacy of their methodology, the precision of their language or the truth of their knowledge. We favour whichever knowledge set, methodology or language we learned as undergraduates. (126)

The warning is well taken. I am a philosopher, trained in the Anglo-American tradition. To such philosophers, the concerns of the contemporary artworld seem off-beat and slightly obsessive. To outsiders, Anglo-American philosophers often come across as horribly naïve (have they not *read* their Foucault?) or insufferably patronizing or, of course, both.<sup>1</sup> Jelinek's book, although addressed to the artworld, engages seriously with philosophy. As Anglo-American philosophers have grown used to being ignored by the artworld, this is refreshing and welcome (it was not always thus; Joseph Kosuth's classic essay, 'Art After Philosophy' contains half a dozen footnotes to Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* (Kosuth 1969)). Furthermore, Jelinek knows the field; she has a formal training in the area. As a result, I have not suffered the usual fate of those who stray into another discipline (blank incomprehension); instead, there are familiar problems, discussed in familiar ways. Furthermore, the general thrust of the book is something with which I have a great deal of sympathy. However, the distance between our starting points is sufficiently great for there to be ample scope for puzzlement.

For most of this paper, I shall explore Jelinek's suggestion for an endogenous value for art: that art is a knowledge-forming discipline. I shall start with reviewing the broad historical and theoretical background, which explains why we need to come up with such a value. This is consonant with Jelinek's discussion, although mine will be couched in different terms. That is, philosophy is conducted at a high level of abstraction and my discussion will reflect that. The background story might make one less optimistic about there being a value for art. I shall then engage directly with Jelinek's suggestion.

I shall accept the received view that modernism (at least in the visual arts) started sometime around the 1860s. The concept of the fine arts, which had been with us at least since the mid-eighteenth century, no longer seemed adequate to capture what artists were up to. Unless I qualify the term, by 'artists' (and 'art') I mean (roughly) the progressive avant garde or what Jelinek calls 'disciplinary art practice'. I shall return to this slightly problematic classification below. The point at issue is that of providing an account of the nature and function of art.

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<sup>1</sup> In my experience those in cognate disciplines have the same kind of reaction to Anglo-American philosophers as the Bishop of Southwark has to Lionel, his parish priest in David Hare's *Racing Demon*: 'There is something in your tone that is sanctimonious. You give an appearance of superiority that is wholly unearned. It profoundly offensive. Because it is based on nothing at all.' (Hare 1991: 76)

Prior to the advent of modernism, when we operated with a concept of the fine arts, there was a compelling story to tell. In as much as the fine arts postulate a constitutive link between art and beauty, and beauty is a value, the value of art comes for free. The aim and function of art is the pursuit of beauty, and beauty is valuable. This view is implausible, even for the fine arts, if one construes 'beauty' narrowly; along the lines of 'presenting a pleasing visual appearance'. However, that would reflect only one sense of the word. A better construal of it would be along the lines of 'aesthetic merit'. In other words, art is valuable to the extent that it possesses aesthetic merit. As an account of the nature and value of the fine arts this does seem plausible. Of course, quite what it is to possess aesthetic merit is a difficult issue, but not (I think) an unresolvable one.

We are now approaching Jelinek's problem. The avant garde denied the constitutive link between beauty and art. However, it is a moot point whether, without beauty, the edifice will stand on its own. In ditching beauty, you ditch the explanation for the value of art. Without something to put in its place, it is simply unclear what the nature and function of art would be. The practice of art might lumber on (in the way that the practice of astrology lumbers on) without point or purpose, but basically it contributes nothing that could not be better done by some other practice.

The two most formidable theorists for modernism (Arthur Danto and Clement Greenberg) each had the same idea for the nature and function of art after the advent of modernism: that the role of art was to explore the boundaries of art. According to Danto 'Art is a transitional stage in the coming of a certain kind of knowledge. The question then is what sort of cognition this can be, and the answer, disappointing as it must sound at first, is the knowledge of what art is' (Danto 1986: 107). Greenberg famously held that 'The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence' (Greenberg 1961: 308). Neither view seems particularly well grounded. In Danto's case, there is a commitment to a kind of Hegelianism; the history of art as a progressive journey towards self-consciousness (see particularly (Danto 1986)). Greenberg's argument (such as it is) is even more bizarre; artists' use of art to establish the limits of art is modelled on Kant's use of logic to establish the limits of logic. However, logic is an obvious tool to turn to in order to think through the limits of things, so it is sensible to turn to it to think through the limits of logic. It is just not obvious why one would use art to think through the limits of art. Art, unlike logic, is not obviously suitable for thinking through the limits of things. Indeed, if Greenberg wanted to plot the limits of art he would have been better off doing so by appealing to logic.

Apart from the dodgy theorizing, it is also not obvious that exploring the boundaries of art could ever be adequate as the nature and function of art. Unlike beauty, there is no link to value. It is just not clear why establishing the boundaries of art is an interesting project, or why anyone (apart from those engaged in the project) should care very much about it. Even if it were possible to say anything sensible about the boundaries of art (which I doubt) it is wholly unclear why knowing the results of such enquiry should be part of a worthwhile human life in the way that a plausible case can be made for beauty being part of a worthwhile human life.

At the heart of the modernist project, therefore, we have a vacuum: there is no account of the value of art. According to Jelinek this vacuum has been filled by values that are external to the practice of art (her term is 'exogenous').

...with the rise of neoliberalism, art's value has been wholly subsumed within the values and mechanisms of neoliberalism. The artworld has lost a way of articulating the value of what we do and art is now understood either directly in market terms, or indirectly in other neoliberal terms, as a measurable instrument for the amelioration of social ills as defined or at least sanctioned by government. (119)

Much of the book is a plausible reconstruction as to who is to blame for this state of affairs. It should make uncomfortable reading for the artworld as, in Jelinek's view, the fault lies with us. It is within our power to establish the ground rules of art, and we have conspicuously failed to do so. Instead, we have bought the establishment line and, under the self-image of being rebellious outsiders, peddle banalities that aim to tick the boxes of neoliberal success: matters such as facilitating plurality, inclusiveness, and widening participation. The argument – which I think, for some, will be the most controversial element of the book – seems cogent to me. Where it leaves us is with the urgent need to find an endogenous value for art to fill the void.

Before considering Jelinek's positive view, there are two issues raised by the discussion so far on which I would like to comment. First, all sides in the debate operate with a narrow conception of art. The danger here is familiar. Philosophers of Art, Art Historians, Art Theorists, and artists themselves focus on a small subset of what the public call 'art'. This subset (which appears under various names – above I have used the term 'avant garde') is invariably associated with progressive circles of metropolitan elites. Furthermore, what goes into the subset reflects the theoretical views of whoever is doing the classifying (one need only look at Greenberg and Danto's view of what constitutes 'advanced art'). Although (of course) there is a wide spectrum of views within the discipline, Anglo-American philosophy tends to skepticism. It generally sides with the public in its doubts as to whether attempts to define the subset reflect reality, or, if they do reflect reality, whether they should be taken at their estimation of their own importance (see, in particular, the new book by Dominic Lopes (Lopes 2014)). Jelinek admits the broader notion of art; her term for the subset to which her theory applies is 'disciplinary art practice': 'Disciplinary art practice is understood specifically as the material and intellectual negotiation with, and performance of, the conditions of modernity' (133). One might have worries about the three aspects I have identified: whether there is such a subset; whether, if there is, it is a shadow of her theoretical commitments (after all, it will be easier to defend the claim that art is a 'knowledge forming discipline' if it is *defined* as being in an 'intellectual negotiation'); and finally, whether, if there is, the manner of its importance as a subset of what the public call 'art'.

The second issue is that it is salutary to reflect that, since this issue raised itself as a problem there have been countless attempts to provide the endogenous value of art. The most prominent is that of modernism (although even that takes on various forms see (Fascina 1985: Essays 3 - 5)) but there have also been many others between theorists of impressionism to theorists of relational aesthetics. Some of these are clearly indexed to when they were stated; they were trying to find the value of the art of their time. However, others clearly have more global ambitions – to try to find the value of 'modern art' since the toppling of beauty from its pedestal. Clearly, the global ambition is defensible unless one wants to be committed to the implausible thesis that the endogenous value of 'disciplinary art practice' changes year on year. Although the failure of all previous accounts is consistent whether thinking that some new account of the endogenous value of disciplinary art

practice will be successful, the sheer number of failed attempts might make one wonder whether the right question is being asked.

It is one of the formidable achievements of this book to grapple with this important issue, and to defend a plausible candidate for the endogenous value of art. Jelinek argues that 'we understand art practice as part of a knowledge-forming discipline in a way that has its analogue in the processes, mechanisms, and contributions of other knowledge-forming disciplines' (119). As I hope will be clear, I broadly agree with Jelinek (although I am less optimistic about the chances of success). However, before discussing her view I am going to take issue with her use of the concepts of 'knowledge' and of 'truth'. Jelinek anticipates this line from those of my disciplinary stripe – 'the philosopher claims the authority to define "knowledge" and disregards the artists' views' (132). However, there is more at stake here than interdisciplinary squabbling over terms. When Jelinek claims that 'truth is not universal, forever, or immutable' (127) she is placing herself in some doubtful company.

There are many interesting questions about truth, and I will attempt to steer clear of all of them with a rather anodyne definition. There are such things as representations. Representations come in many forms: sentences, maps of the coastline, pictures, and so on and so forth. Perhaps the most significant type of representation is a belief; my belief that there is a tree outside represents there being a tree outside. Truth is a property of representations: a representation is true if it is accurate – if the world is as it is represented as being. Notice that this definition says nothing about how we come to form representations, how we know which representations are true, or how representations represent. It also says nothing about what is meant by 'the world'; for these purposes, I am relying on a common-sense notion of something that is there *anyway*, independent of our experience (Williams 1985: 138). The point I want to make is that without a distinction between an accurate and inaccurate representation (that is, without the notion of truth) we would not have a workable notion of representation at all. Without a workable notion of representation, we would not have a workable notion of belief. Truth – something universal, forever, and immutable – is indispensable.

Although I have established my conclusion by argument, one can also get to the same place simply by reflecting on obvious features of our practices. If you are setting off to sail up an unfamiliar coast or drive in an unfamiliar city you had better have a map that is accurate. If you want coffee, you will (barring good luck) only be successful in getting coffee if your belief that the café sells coffee is true. I have heard it said that a commitment to truth is in some way linked to authoritarianism or right-wing thinking. Aside from finding this connection theoretically obscure, it seems to me politically naive. We have to keep clear that some things are true; it does not matter how rich, powerful, or insidious some force is, that force cannot make things that are true not true. The most it can do is convince people to believe something is true when it is not true (which leaves it in permanent danger of being found out). Faith in the notion of truth is the strongest bulwark against oppression. This is surely the main lesson of Orwell's *1984*; Winston Smith writes in his diary that 'Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four'; it is only the Party's apparent ability to destroy the difference between that representation and the representation that two plus two makes five that makes it appear that all is lost.

Indeed, Jelinek would not be able to state her argument without this core notion of truth (none of us would be able to state anything without this core notion of truth). When she says 'Artistic ambitions

are eclipsed by neoliberal ones and, because we have no distinct values with which to negotiate neoliberalism, we fail to resist or even recognize where we do not resist' (63) I take it she is not simply 'sounding off'; making noises in a void. She is making a claim which she takes to be an accurate representation of the way things are. If I said 'It is not the case that artistic ambitions are eclipsed by neoliberal ones' we could not both be right; one of us would have got it wrong. One of the claims is true and, whichever one it is, the other one cannot also be true. If it could be, it would not matter which of the two claims Jelinek made. However, it does matter so it could not be.

As Jelinek realizes, truth and knowledge are closely aligned. You do not count as knowing something unless that thing is true. You can think you know something and be thoroughly justified in thinking you know it, but if it not true you only think you know it, you do not actually know it. You cannot know that the world is 6000 years old because the world is not 6000 years old.

I said this was not about an interdisciplinary squabbling over terms. The words 'truth' and 'knowledge' are used in a wide variety of ways, and in different ways in different contexts. As long as we do not allow that to obscure the fact that the notion of accuracy of representations is indispensable this need not concern us. So is there *any* notion of 'truth' or 'knowledge' which will vindicate Jelinek's claim that art is a 'knowledge-forming discipline'?

Jelinek goes into some detail as to what art actually does (which I will explore in presently). Does it matter whether or not it goes by the moniker 'knowledge'? Jelinek's reasons for thinking that it does appear to be pragmatic: 'To view art as a discipline akin to other knowledge-forming disciplines is a strategic move' (158). I take it that she means that linking art to disciplines that are uncontroversially knowledge-forming (say, the various sciences) means both that it will be taken seriously by those outside the artworld and open up new possibilities and insights for those inside the artworld. This raises our question again: with what justification can Jelinek appropriate the label, 'knowledge-forming', for the arts?

To answer this, we need to look in detail at Jelinek's account of the endogenous value of contemporary art. Her account focusses on the rhetorical power of art, and in this she aligns herself with some of the deepest and most influential thinking of art in the Western tradition. Jelinek claims that art '[can open] up many, multiple, various, nuanced, complex, other stories...art may produce the kind of surprises that profoundly alter our established ways of seeing' (146).

In her concluding remarks in the book, she sums this up in a similar fashion:

At times, art creates radical new stories that profoundly alter our way of seeing, disrupting the order of things, making new sense of our place and time in ways that undermine totalizing discourse. (161)

However, we can all make up stories – even stories that change the way we view things. So what makes this a definition of '*art*' (as opposed, say, to writing novels)? Jelinek has two replies to this. The first focusses on the disciplinary nature of art: the stories are 'in response to a knowledge of the history of art practice' (148). This shares with much contemporary art theorizing (including the Institutional Theory of art in both Dickie's and Danto's versions) that art is essentially self-conscious. What makes this practice *art* practice is that it draws upon 'the history and knowledge set of an art practice' (149). The second reply is that art does not simply contribute another monolithic story; it

does not tell it how it is to the exclusion of everything else. Rather, it recognizes plurality: 'Unlike other knowledge-forming disciplines, art does something more than invent new, nuanced or more complex stories: it enacts the plurality inherent in this process and, in so doing, challenges orthodoxy' (160). These created stories, Jelinek claims, 'constitute new knowledge' (151).

We can distinguish two different claims here. The first is that art creates radically new stories, and these stories constitute new knowledge. The second is that these radically new stories alter our perception, and in altering our perception we suffer an increase in knowledge.

In making the first claim, Jelinek claims (via a discussion of Dewey) to have Shelley and Wordsworth on her side (132). However, the role of the stories is to alter our perception. To fulfil this role, it is not clear why they need to claim to be knowledge. After all, our perceptions can be altered by a knock on the head, by a gift from a child, by accidentally treading on a beggar, and is not clear what merit would attach to calling those instances of knowledge. Jelinek might accuse me of restricting the term to 'intellectual and cerebral knowledge' as she puts it (131). Perhaps Jelinek's claim is that anything that alters the way we see the world counts as knowledge. That would seem too broad; as stated above, the way we see the world can be altered by just about anything, and if just about anything can be knowledge then the term would lose all meaning.

What of the second claim; when our perceptions are altered, do we get to know things about the world that we did not know previously? Are we being taken closer to the truth? Jelinek appears to think that the role of the stories is to alter our perception for the *better*. In what way could our perception of the world be *better* if not that our perception was *more accurate*, or closer to the way the world actually is (the *truth*). If Jelinek rejects this, it is difficult to make sense of her project. Artworks that created stories that made us sympathetic to neoliberal values would be as accurate as any other and no artwork would be open to criticism on this account (in particular, Jelinek would have to withdraw her criticism of certain works by Damien Hirst (147-48)). In as much as art reliably alters our perceptions to give us clearer insight, it is a knowledge-forming mechanism.

Jelinek's view provides an account of the nature and function of art that distinguishes it from activism, therapy, being a branch of the social services, or whatever other practice it is in danger of lapsing into. I shall finish this paper in philosophical style (often mistaken for pedantry) which is to request that more flesh is put on the bones; that is, a request for details to be filled in. I shall take the account to be that it is the role of art is to create nuanced and complex stories, which enact the plurality inherent in the process, with the purpose of altering the way we see the world.

As I said above, the claim that the nature and function of art is to alter the way we see the world goes back at least to Plato, and since then has been part of some of the deepest and most influential thinking of art in the Western tradition. A version can be found in Proust's essay on Chardin:

If, looking at a Chardin, you can say to yourself: This is intimate, this is congenial, this is full of life like a kitchen, then you will be able to say to yourself, walking around a kitchen: This is strange, this I grand, this is beautiful like a Chardin. (Proust 1954) Quoted in (Wollheim 1987: 98).

What is particular about Jelinek's view is the mechanism by which are alters the way we see the world: by telling us stories of a highly complex nature. This leaves us two things to sort out: the

connection between a work of art and the story, and the connection between the story and our altered vision of the world.

On the first connection (between the work of art and the story) one might have wished Jelinek had provided us with some examples. Her own practice mixes interventions (works made and shown 'in response to a specific site or context' (<http://www.alanajelinek.com/>: accessed 9/4/14)) with the production of objects. Some of the works are literally stories; for example, *The Fork's Tale*, a novel of serialized over 12 months, published at the rate of one chapter per month in 2012. Another (*Capital Growth*) involved six oil paintings (each of one of the centres of capitalism in London) which were left at six locations associated with the artworld that had shown exceptional growth in privatization or links with the private sector. It is a bit unclear what Jelinek means when she says that these works 'create stories' (I am discounting the literal reading of this in the case of *The Fork's Tale*). They certainly prompt thoughts and prompt reflection, which is perhaps all that Jelinek means by her claim. However, if that is what she means, it is in danger of being a truism (although none the worse for that – a truth in this area is welcome, whether or not they are truisms). The second connection is easier to grasp. In this case, a work will prompt thoughts and reflection and those thoughts and reflection can alter our perception: we can cease to see things are part of the natural order, and start to see them as contingent products of our social arrangements (for example). Stories can get us to see animals as worthy subjects of life (*Charlotte's Web*), war as terrible (*Guernica*), or the dispossessed as worthy of attention (*The Grapes of Wrath*). As Donald Davidson says of metaphor (and metaphors are, I think, structurally similar to artworks) 'there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character' (Davidson 1978: 263).

This is not so much a criticism of Jelinek as an invitation for her to say more. It might be that she simply wants to remind us that we should value art for its capacity to prompt the kinds of thought and reflection that sometimes changes our view of matters. As an alternative to valuing art for being entertaining, or for its therapeutic qualities, or for bringing those 'difficult to reach demographics' into the art gallery the point is well taken. However, it looks rather less a radical new proposal than a call for a return to valuing the communicative function of art.

It might be that I am selling Jelinek's account short. It is not only that she thinks art creates new and complex stories, but that it creates new and complex stories of a certain sort.

By creating, promulgating and inhabiting stories from within a different set of values – producing nuance and complexity in the face of orthodoxy – the artworld will be better able to resist totalizing discourses, including neoliberalism. This is true of all disciplines, but because art is not just a knowledge-forming discipline but a public action, entailing both action and story, it is directly constitutive of the public realm. Stories constitute ourselves, our personal and public identities, our society. When art enacts plurality, it necessarily makes the simplistic, reductive orthodoxies more nuanced and more complicated. (152-53)

The thought here is that because the stories art creates are nuanced and complex, and because they enact plurality, they will (for those reasons alone) stand opposed to totalizing discourses. This leaves art on the side of the righteous. Some support for this claim can be found in the fact that the 'official' art of totalitarian regimes (Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia and, Jelinek might want to claim, neoliberalism) was (or is) generally dire in virtue of its failure to be nuanced, complex, or enacting of

plurality. This is where I find myself less optimistic than Jelinek. I am skeptical as to whether it is in the nature of art to be either on the side of the angels or of the devils. A work of art could create a story that was nuanced and complex, that enacted plurality, and yet be rebarbative. After all, unless the plurality is only a sham plurality, it will contain the bad as well as the good, the vicious as well as the virtuous. To return to the first and possibly the best of the theorists who see art as a branch of rhetoric, Plato knew art to be as capable of altering our view of the world for the worse as it is capable of altering our world for the better.

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