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Categories of Art at 50: An Introduction

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Forthcoming (2020) in a symposium issue of *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*

Kendall Walton's "Categories of Art" is one of the foremost contributions to 20th century aesthetics thanks to its vivid articulation of the following combination of claims: first, that the aesthetic value of artworks is a function of their perceptible properties and yet, second of all, historical/intentional factors enter into audiences' appreciation, and perception of, such properties. The first thesis is typically associated with aesthetic formalism. Walton's aim, in "Categories of Art", was to show that formalism is untenable insofar as it is affirmed in conjunction with a denial of the second thesis; rather, Walton claimed, facts about a work's origin have an essential role in aesthetic judgement, both as a matter of psychological and normative fact. This thesis is one that, with the help of his famous 'Guernica' thought experiment, Walton brilliantly illustrated throughout "Categories of Art." Various subtle and detailed claims about the nature of aesthetic properties, aesthetic judgement, aesthetic perception, and artistic categories, were developed along the way.

Given the influence of "Categories of Art" there has been significantly less attention to its arguments than one might have expected. (By contrast, consider the wealth of literature that followed in the wake of Walton's "Fearing Fictions" and "Transparent Pictures.") This year marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of "Categories of Art", presenting an ideal opportunity for the aesthetics community to reflect on its various theses. In this symposium, Madeleine Ransom, Stacie Friend and David Davies examine a number of these. Walton, in turn, responds, centrally discussing his restriction to categories of art that are perceptually distinguishable, a topic discussed by all three commentators, and how he now proposes to understand this thorny notion.

Ransom takes up the question of how, on the view in "Categories of Art", facts about an artwork's origin are meant to affect its perception. Walton is often thought to have in mind here the thesis that perception is cognitively penetrated by beliefs/knowledge that represent the relevant facts. Ransom denies that this is true to the spirit of "Categories of Art" and instead defends a perceptual learning account on which mere exposure to exemplars of various categories of art can affect perception in the relevant ways.

Friend explores how to extend Walton's thesis to works of literature, artworks which, given their non-perceptual nature, Walton claimed his thesis was not straightforwardly applicable to. Building upon previous work, Friend defends the claim that there is such a thing as reading literature in an artistic category that is analogous to seeing (or hearing) visual art (or music) in a category: features of a text non-inferentially strike one in certain ways, e.g., as playful or biting, via an automatic processes of categorization of the text, e.g., as fantasy or political satire.

Davies investigates the significance of Walton's aforementioned restriction, when introducing his 'psychological thesis', to perceptually distinguishable categories of art.¹ Brian

¹ Walton's (1970, 338) psychological thesis is that "what aesthetic properties a work seems to us to have depends not only on what non-aesthetic features we perceive in it but also on which of them are standard, which variable, and which contra-standard for us."

Laetz (2010) has argued that this restriction denies historical/intentional factors relevance for category membership, thereby showing that Walton's view in "Categories of Art" is more formalist, and involves a different notion of categorial correctness, than has been traditionally assumed. Davies defends the traditional reading against the first charge. Responding to the second, he challenges Walton's claim that the categories relevant for appreciation must be perceptually distinguishable, proposing an alternative contextualist conception whereby they incorporate, as standard, the artifactuality of artworks.

It is a testament to the success of "Categories of Art" just how many of its central concepts have become staple tools of the contemporary aesthetician. It is our hope that readers of *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* find that the papers in this symposium provide new insights into this masterful contribution to our field.

References:

Laetz, B. (2010). "Kendall Walton's 'Categories of Art': A Critical Commentary." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (3): 287-306.

Walton, K. (1970). "Categories of Art." *Philosophical Review* 79 (3): 334-367.