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WHAT IS ART? A PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

Thomas C. Scott-Phillips

What is art? Marcel Duchamp made this question pertinent when he developed his 'Readymades': ordinary, manufactured objects that he presented as art. In this paper, I use pragmatics – the branch of linguistics concerned with language use in context, and which has its historical roots in the philosophy of language – to argue that, if we accept that art is a form of communication, from artist to audience, then Duchamp was correct to claim that anything can be art, so long as it is presented as such.

In 1917 Marcel Duchamp purchased a standard-issue urinal, signed it 'R. Mutt', rotated it 90° from its usual presentation, entitled it *Fountain*, and then submitted it to an exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists. Despite the exhibition's rules, which stated that anything would be accepted provided the entry fee was paid, *Fountain* was rejected. Nevertheless, the complaints that this rejection generated arguably drew more attention to the piece than it would have received had it been exhibited. Indeed, Duchamp's goal with *Fountain* was ultimately to challenge the received wisdom of what art is. By rejecting his work, the Society confirmed the conventional view of art, and hence made Duchamp's challenge a pertinent one. This impact has made *Fountain* the most famous of Duchamp's 'Readymades': ordinary, manufactured objects that he presented as art.

Nearly 100 years on, Duchamp's influence is easy to see. The art establishment no longer rejects conceptual work. On the contrary, it often celebrates it. The Turner Prize, the most high-profile contemporary art award in

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Britain, is dominated by conceptual art. It is the focus of a great deal of media attention, much of it critical. 'Is this art?!' is a frequent lament. (The French equivalent of the Turner Prize is, incidentally, called the Marcel Duchamp Prize.) This hostility seems to derive, just as the Society of Independent Artists' rejection of *Fountain* did, from a view that conceptual art deviates too much from more traditional ideas of what art is. In the past an artist's craft was to represent the world, and their skill lay in the accuracy and aesthetic appeal of those depictions. Contemporary art does not fit this mould, and so we are led to question whether it really is art at all.

Art involves communication, from artist to audience. Human communication is a topic of relevance to several different academic disciplines, but is particularly central for a branch of linguistics called *pragmatics*, which is concerned with how language is *used*, out there in the real world. It has its historical roots in the work of a number of mid 20th-century philosophers of language, who argued, contrary to a then standard assumption in both linguistics and philosophy, that it is impossible to describe linguistic communication purely in terms of machine-like encoding and decoding. What we *say* is not the same as what we *mean*.

Instead, when we communicate, we do more than simply provide a signal for others to decode. In particular, we also make it apparent to our audience that we are trying to communicate with them in the first place. Of course, when we speak it is obvious that communication is our goal, but for some other signals it is not always so clear. I was in a coffee shop yesterday, and I wanted the waitress to top up my drink. To indicate this to her, I tilted my cup in a particular, somewhat stylised way. If I had not tilted it in this way, the waitress would not have realised that my tilt was a request, or indeed an attempt to communicate at all. After all, coffee cups are incidentally tilted all the time. What made my tilt different was the stylised way in which I did it.

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The technical term is *ostension*: I tilted my coffee cup in an ostensive way. Ostension is the quality that some behaviours have that makes it apparent to the intended audience that the behaviour is intended as an act of communication. Ostension invites the audience to interpret the behaviour as a signal. It says 'I am trying to communicate with you', and it invites the audience to ask 'What am I trying to say?'. In other words, the stylised way in which I tilt my coffee cup tells the waitress that this is not just any old tilt; it is a tilt that has a particular meaning that I want to communicate to her. Her job is to figure out that meaning.

In the same way, the act of putting a painting on display tells the viewer that this is not just any old object, but an object that has a particular meaning; one which I, the artist, wish to communicate to the world. In short, putting something in an art gallery is an act of ostension: it declares to the world that this object has some meaning, and it demands that the audience search for that meaning. When we engage with the piece, we accede to that request, and we then face the challenge of working out what the intended meaning of the signal actually is. This is true also of language: words and sentences are often ambiguous, and have different meanings in different contexts. Our job as listeners is to work out what the utterance means here and now.

When we create a signal, linguistic or otherwise, we do so in a way that conveys that signal's meaning in a more-or-less effective way. I could have conducted an elaborate mime for my waitress, but why would I do that when a simple tilt would do? In fact, if I had performed an intricate mime as a request for more coffee, the waitress would likely have searched for a richer interpretation: he can't just be requesting more coffee, she would reason, because otherwise he would have done something simpler. He must mean something more than that.

In sum, in any communicative scenario there are two things that the communicator must make apparent to the audience. The first is their intention to communicate; the

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second the meaning they wish to communicate. In language, the first is achieved by opening your mouth, the second by the actual words you use. Just the same, in art the first is achieved by putting the piece on display, and the second by the form of the piece itself.

One of my favourite pieces of art is *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, a bronze sculpture by Umberto Boccioni, produced in 1913 and on display at the Tate Modern in London. It is of a weighty human figure from which twists, angles, points and curves protrude from all parts; the effect is one of dynamism, power and fluidity. The figure strides forwards, a willing and able participant in the coming age of speed, technology and industry. This interpretation is a standard one, and like all interpretations of communicative stimuli, it comes in the two stages described above. First the audience must acquiesce to the demand to consider the piece as something with a meaning to be communicated; second they must interpret the sculpture's particular form.

An intuitive idea about the difference between art and not-art is that the difference lies in the second of these two stages: art is anything that we can appreciate and interpret. What Duchamp wanted to say was that actually the difference lies in the first stage. The difference between *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* and a random piece of bronze I might find at the scrap heap is not the form of the object; after all, what if I found something that had by chance been battered into the same shape? Rather, the difference is the fact that one is in an art gallery and the other is not.

How could Duchamp convey this message through art itself? That is, how could he construct a piece that invites the interpretation that art is whatever is put on display as art? He needed to focus the viewer's mind not on the piece itself, but on the act of putting it on display – in other words, of the artist's expression of their intention to communicate with the audience. His solution was to take an everyday object, do (almost) nothing to it, and then place it in a gallery. What this says to the audience is: there is meaning

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in this object, but that meaning does not derive from what I, the artist, have done to create it – because I have not done anything of that sort. The audience is thus forced to reason that the piece's meaning must lie in the other aspect of interpretation, namely the fact that Duchamp has put it in a gallery and hence demanded that it be considered art at all.

Some of Duchamp's contemporaries recognised this. The art journal *The Blind Man* gave space for several contributors to complain about the Society of Independent Artists' rejection of *Fountain*. One of these observed that 'Whether Mr. Mutt made the fountain with his own hands or not has no importance. He *chose* it.' In other words, the art in *Fountain* is not the object itself, but the decision to submit it to the gallery in the first place. In this respect, the Society's decision about whether or not to accept it was largely irrelevant.

Art, then, is whatever is put on display as art. There are some interesting borderline cases. The natural world is not art, since it is not put on display as such, but documentation of the natural world – the photo, the landscape painting – is. Dancing alone is not art, but dancing with the intention of being viewed by others, as a dancer, is. Food is not normally produced to be displayed as art, but in some fine dining institutions it is. Food also illustrates that simply putting something on display as art does not make it *good* art: food can be artful but revolting, just as Turner Prize entries can be artful but banal. But as Duchamp realised, they are both art nevertheless, simply and only if they are presented as such.

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