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FROM ZOMBIE ART TO DEAD ART

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Zombie art, or salvage art, are artworks that are damaged beyond repair, deemed 'no-longer-art' by insurance companies, and removed from the market and stored at claims inventories due to their purported loss of value. This paper aims to make sense of the notion of zombie art. It then aims to determine whether artefacts that fall under this concept retain any aesthetic value, and whether they can genuinely cease being artworks, i.e. be dead art.

1. Introduction

It all came down to a sneeze. An Ad Reinhardt piece once worth millions deemed by insurance companies to be a 'total loss': damaged beyond repair, and removed from market circulation due to its purported loss of value. Shunned but yet not destroyed; forgotten but not gone. The piece, like many others, appears to have gained a zombie-like status: deemed valueless, and often stripped of their status as works of art, yet not quite dead; their physical form still relatively intact, and confined to the netherworld of art-insurance claim inventories.

Aesthetes, i.e. art lovers, will be quick to quibble; 'What do you mean its valueless?'; 'How dare you say it's no longer art!' A sneeze, if not a slash, a crack etc., might cause a loss of monetary value of a piece of art, but to subsequently say that the piece is of no intrinsic value *simpliciter* is to conflate monetary value with aesthetic value. Moreover, even if such damage did decrease the aesthetic value of the piece, it seems absurd to say that that suffices to make it no longer a work of art. If I deplore Leonardo da

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Vinci's *La Gioconda*, does it suffice for me to draw a moustache on Lisa to make it no longer an artwork? Can I pee on Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* to make it no longer art? Surely not. What's more, if certain contemporary conventionalist views on art are correct, it is not only implausible that I could rob an artefact of its status as a work of art, it appears down right impossible.

There is, then, much room for contention about the aesthetics of zombie art; in terms of both their value and also in terms of their status as artworks. Contention aside, there also appears to be inconsistences, if not confusion, in the practice of declaring works as zombie art. For instance, damaged artworks are conferred the status of no longer being art, and called 'dead art', although such works are sometimes later repaired and even sold. Similarly, artworks that can be easily repaired also gain the status of being zombie art if their creators refuse to allow restoration or if they disown the piece after restoration.

From all this, we see that zombie art presents aestheticians (i.e. the philosophers of art, not the beauticians!) with three tasks: (1) shed light on the aforementioned confusions by outlining a concept of zombie art that is both coherent and more or less in-step with what insurance companies, as well as the art-world, claim about zombie art, (2) explore whether zombie art can have aesthetic value, and (3) explore whether zombie art can also gain the status of being dead art.

2. What is Zombie Art?

As it stands, the terms 'zombie art', 'dead art' and 'salvage art' are treated as being synonymous. Damaged works of art are often declared zombie art and no longer art, i.e. dead art. This practice, however, is problematic as some works thus declared are also regarded as being not completely dead. It would help then to pose some structure on our use of these notions, i.e. to define the terms we

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associate with them more finely so that we can make use of them in a consistent fashion. I propose the following definitions:

> *Zombie art*: any artwork is a piece of zombie art if and only if it is (i) damaged but not destroyed, (ii) deemed to be a 'total loss', i.e. of no monetary value, by art-insurance companies, and (iii) removed from market circulation.
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> *Total loss*: any artwork is declared a 'total loss', i.e. of no monetary value, if and only if it is either (iv) damaged beyond repair, (v) damaged to the extent that the costs of repairing it exceeds the cost of market value, or (vi) damaged as such that the artist denounces the piece, as well any possible restorations.
>
> *Dead art*: any artefact is a piece of dead art if and only if (vii) it was once a piece of art, and (viii) it is no longer a piece of art.

Some general clarifications are in order. Firstly, it isn't clear whether artworks that gain zombie-status really cease being artworks. The issue is controversial and needs further investigation. So here we define 'zombie art' and 'dead art' as two separate categories and leave room for there to be some overlap in what it is to which they refer. As for 'salvage art', whilst it has been used synonymously with both 'zombie art' and 'dead art', I take this to be symptomatic of a failure to draw a distinction between these two categories. Most instances of the use of the term would have it that it is really one and the same category as zombie art.

Secondly, in the definition of zombie art, conditions (i)-(iii) are individually necessary and jointly sufficient to make an artefact fall under the concept of zombie art. So a crack in Auguste Rodin's *The Kiss*, no matter how large, needn't make the piece a zombie. Similarly, famous pieces are

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often gifted to museums with the proviso that they cannot be sold, but this by itself doesn't suffice to give them zombie status. What bestows such status, rather, is the fulfilment of *all* of the necessary conditions.

In contrast, the conditions for something to count as a total loss prove to be individually necessary and sufficient. For example, Alexandre Dubuisson's *La Moisson* is neither damaged beyond repair nor disowned by Dubuisson himself. Nonetheless, the piece is considered a paradigm example of zombie art, as it has been declared a 'total loss' on grounds that the costs to fix the damage exceed its market value. Analogously, a piece of art might be restored given that restoring it comes relatively cheap, but it can still be declared a 'total loss' if the artist no longer recognizes it as her piece.

Now for specifics: condition (i), i.e. artworks being damaged but not destroyed, is important because any piece of art that is destroyed is, arguably, neither a work of art any longer nor of any aesthetic value. What is interesting about pieces of zombie art, however, is that they aren't destroyed; their physical forms remain relatively intact. The necessity of damage itself, namely in conditions (i)–(vi), is also significant because it prevents the conferral of zombie-status for *ad hoc* reasons. For instance, it prevents the conferral of such status if the artist denounces his piece for extrinsic reasons; say because the work is no longer in vogue.

There are also relevant conditions that are absent from the above definitions. For example, a striking feature of zombie art, in fact what partly appears to contribute to their zombie-like status, is their location in art-insurance claim inventories. Such conditions are relevant, but they are best treated as accidental features of zombie art. The reason is that they don't appear to be necessary or sufficient (even jointly) for zombie-hood. For instance, damaged works might reside with the artist even if stripped of market value. They might even be exhibited, as *La Moisson* and Jeff Koon's *Balloon Dog* have in the *No Longer Art* exhibition,

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curated by Elka Krajewska and Mark Wasiuta, which aims to call attention to damaged pieces of art *qua* zombie/salvage art.

There is plenty more to say but enough has been said to get a rough handle on the above definitions, especially our definition of zombie art. On the whole, what we get here is the understanding that zombie art are artworks that are damaged in such a way that they are declared to be a 'total loss' by insurance companies, and subsequently removed from market circulation. Some aestheticians might contest that this makes the concept of zombie art too closely tied to legal practices as opposed to other more abstract aesthetic notions. True, the current account is certainly guilty of this. But here's the sweetener: the definition is not only intimately linked to the legal-cum-institutional practices that gave rise to zombie art in the first place, it is also useful in addressing questions that are aesthetically significant. Let us now turn to two such questions.

3. Can Zombie Art have any value?

We observed earlier that to flat out declare zombie art to be of no value is to conflate monetary value with aesthetic value. In fairness, though, there is a sense in which the two notions may be linked. One of the most popular views of aesthetic value, as held by aestheticians like Kendall Walton, Malcolm Budd and Jerrold Levinson, states that artworks have (intrinsic) aesthetic value if they appropriately give rise to pleasure in our contemplation of them. Now presumably what cause such pleasure, at least in part, are aesthetic properties possessed by the artworks. (Aesthetic properties, very roughly, are properties that are attributed to objects based on how they look, feel or appear; properties that fall under predicates like 'serene', 'vivid', 'moving', 'trite', 'tragic', etc.). Once we take this into account, we see that a piece of zombie art might have diminished aesthetic value if some of its aesthetic properties that were

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responsible for giving rise to pleasure in our contemplation of the artwork have been lost. Alternatively, some features that detract from the artwork's ability to give rise to pleasure have been added (like mould, mucus, etc.). It is reasonable, therefore, to hold that damage, which decreases monetary value, also decreases aesthetic value, and *ergo* that the two notions of value are intermittently linked.

There are also grounds to declare an even stronger relationship. What decreases the monetary value of damaged art, arguably, is that the damage somehow renders our contemplation of the artwork less pleasurable. If so, not only does monetary value correlate with aesthetic value, monetary value would be dependent on aesthetic value. That is, damage decreases monetary value precisely because it decreases aesthetic value.

It would certainly be nice if monetary value necessarily depended on aesthetic value but evidence suggests otherwise. As it turns out monetary value and aesthetic value can be linked, but it is not always linked. A Robert Rauschenberg piece on display as part of the *No Longer Art* exhibition is said to have no conspicuous signs of damage even though it has been declared a 'total loss' and removed from market circulation. If there is no easily visible signs of damage, it is hard to see how an audience member would be robbed of any significant pleasure in her contemplation of the piece that she would have were the piece not damaged. Hence, loss of monetary value isn't necessarily tied to a loss of aesthetic value. A piece may have the latter value without the former.

The issue about a lack of visible damage also points to another difficulty with the dependence thesis. A lot of the stock aesthetic properties are visible, but the rise of art schools like Dadaism, as well as abstract art more generally, has pressed the need to widen our notion of aesthetic properties to include properties that aren't perceptual. For example, some of the aesthetic properties that make us delight in our contemplation of the *Fountain* are properties like *being daring, imprudent* and *witty*. Such properties

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don't appear to be properties that can be lost when a work is damaged (although they presumably would be if the work is completely annihilated; but now we are not talking about zombie art anymore). Therefore, again, while damage might result in a loss of monetary value, it needn't in a loss of aesthetic value.

The take home message here isn't that insurance company practices are aesthetically corrupt in that they routinely confer zero monetary value to works that are clearly of significant aesthetic value. Damage that decreases monetary value often does so precisely because it decreases aesthetic value. Nonetheless, this as we have seen isn't always the case. Moreover, a decrease in aesthetic value isn't quite the same as a total loss of such value. While damage might render a work of art of no financial consequence, as the case of inconspicuous damage to non-abstract art and conspicuous damage to abstract art illustrate, it needn't rob the work of aesthetic value altogether. Further still, it is the remnants of aesthetic value that best explains the attempts of some private collectors to acquire pieces of zombie art. So rest easy fellow aesthetes; zombie artworks may be a little worse for wear, but on the whole, they are things that we can cherish, and on aesthetic grounds.

4. Can Zombie Art ever become Dead Art?

If zombie artworks tend to retain aesthetic value, it stands to reason that they can't be declared dead, i.e. they can't literally be declared no longer art. That said, establishing the relationship, or lack thereof, between zombie art and dead art isn't as simple as it may appear. If we want to argue that even a small number of zombie artworks are genuinely works of art, we face the difficulty that standard definitions of art don't employ the notion of aesthetic value in their conferrals of art-status. Similarly, if we want to argue that even a small number of zombie artworks are

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also genuinely no longer art, we face the difficulty that not only is there an absence of any aesthetic theories that tell us how artworks can stop being artworks, highly influential contemporary definitions of art appear, *prima facie*, to rule out dead art. In this final section, I want to take for granted that at least some zombie artworks are genuine artworks, and instead explain some possible ways in which zombie artworks might cease being artworks.

Lets begin by looking at the main obstacle to thinking that artefacts can ever cease being works of art once they are conferred the status of being art. This obstacle comes in the form of conventionalist definitions of art. As it stands, there are two main versions of this view. The first is institutional conventionalism, endorsed by Arthur Danto and George Dickie, which states that to be a work of art, an artwork has to be created by an artist in order to be presented to an art-world public. The second is historical conventionalism, as endorsed by Levinson, which is the view that artworks necessarily stand in an art-historical relation to some set of earlier artworks.

Both views are flawed. Historical conventionalism faces a regress problem: if works of art can only be art if they stand in the relevant relations to earlier works of art, these earlier works can only be art if they stand in the relevant relations to even earlier works of art, and so on *ad infinitum*. Moreover, both forms of conventionalism face a circularity problem. In the case of institutional conventionalism, it defines '*art*works' in terms of *art*-worlds, which, in the absence of a definition of 'art-worlds' independent of the notion of 'artworks', renders the definition circular. *Mutatis mutandis* for historical conventionalism with regards to its use of the notions of '*art*-historical' and 'earlier *art*works' in its definition of art. What's more, both views can be charged with being un-illuminating in that they provide a way of grouping artworks without explaining what it is about the artworks themselves that make such groupings apt.

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That said, there are responses to these worries, which many have found convincing. This, in conjunction with the ability of conventionalist views to accommodate more Avant Garde artworks than tradition definitions of art (more on this later), has allowed these views to remain popular. Therefore, whilst I'm not sympathetic to any conventionalist conception of art, in order to convince the widest possible audience, it needs to be explained how dead art, contrary to appearances, is consistent with these conceptions. I think this can be done. This is easier for institutional conventionalism. Part of the view is that an artist *intends* the work to be displayed to an art audience. Given the damage that a work of art goes through, or the modification that takes place in its restoration, its creator may no longer intend that the work be presented to an art-audience. Neil Young once called back copies of a record just prior to release and used CD versions of it to tile his roof. In such cases, the zombie artworks can be regarded as no longer being art.

The case for historical conventionalism is harder. If a work of art stands in the appropriate art-historical relations to earlier artworks, it is difficult to see how artefacts that become artworks can ever stop being artworks, as history doesn't change. The trick is to note that conventionalism of this form would only render dead art logically impossible if it provides conditions that are both necessary and sufficient for something to count as art. To clarify, if standing in the relevant historical relations is only necessary to confer art-status, a piece of zombie art may acquire dead art-status by failing to meet any of the other conditions which (jointly) suffice to make the piece a genuine work of art. Likewise, if the instantiation of these historical relations are only sufficient for a work to be classified as art, a zombie artwork might cease being a piece of art by failing to meet any of the other conditions that are necessary for being art.

The crucial point is that, since historical conventionalism has a regress problem, the only way to overcome the problem is to qualify that there are some further conditions

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that are relevant for making something a work of art, especially for making the first ever piece of art a genuine work of art. (Artists' intentions might be one such condition). Once such conditions are added, it turns out that standing in the relevant art-historical relations to earlier artworks can only be regarded as a necessary or sufficient condition for acquiring art-status; not both. So, the way to revise the view to overcome the regress problem, inadvertently, creates room for pieces of art to lose their art-status in either of the two ways mentioned above.

Note, this is all by way of allowing for the possibility of zombie art to become dead art. But I haven't really told you exactly how zombie artworks can die. Of course, zombie art, or any artwork for that matter, can cease being art when they are completely destroyed. If I burn Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*, the resulting ashes, I take it, isn't art. However, as noted earlier, what is interesting about zombie artworks in particular is that their physical forms are still relatively intact. So the answer we are looking for must be something other than the annihilation response. Two possible answers were hinted at earlier, so lets look at them first:

> *The Artist Thesis*: artefacts can become 'dead' when there are modifications to them (especially concerning their aesthetic properties) that are (i) unintended and (ii) not endorsed by the artists.
>
> *The Value Thesis*: artefacts can become 'dead' when they don't retain any significant aesthetic value.

Before we begin to sink our teeth into these, it is worth noting that there might be multiple ways zombie art might cease being art, so our endorsement of one of the above theses, or any other independent thesis for that matter, shouldn't necessarily make us rule out others, at least not

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without further investigation. Hence both the artist thesis and the value thesis might be correct, and so might others.

Now for the teeth: both of the above theses, whilst they have been suggested by our earlier discussion, are problematic. The value thesis is problematic because any conception of art that ties art-status to aesthetic value has difficulty making sense of bad art. One might want to argue that an artwork can be aesthetically horrid, and not just because it has minimal aesthetic value, but because it has no aesthetic value whatsoever; or because it has negative aesthetic value. (This tends to be the conservative response to pieces of shock-art, such as Andreas Serrano's *Piss Christ*.) If you want to argue this way, i.e. to simultaneously declare that an artefact has no aesthetic value and yet that it is still an artwork, this isn't the thesis for you.

The artist thesis, on the other hand, can accommodate bad art; even ones so bad as to have no aesthetic value. The problem here is that since (ii) is one of the features that makes an artefact a 'total loss', and consequently a candidate for zombie-hood, we run the risk that we lose the distinction between zombie art and dead art. This problem, however, isn't as worrisome as it may appear. Since the denouncement by an artist is only a sufficient condition for something to count as zombie art, whilst there will be zombie artworks that are dead, there will also be ones that aren't; namely ones that gain their zombie-status by means other than being denounced by their creators.

Neither of these theses, I gather, is entirely satisfactory. So let me end by suggesting an altogether distinct way of explaining how zombie art can become dead art. This has to do with traditional definitions of art that rival contemporary conventionalist views. Such definitions typically confer art-hood on the basis of artefacts possessing some salient type of aesthetic property. A popular candidate for the relevant type of property used to be representational properties. If we subscribe to such a view, a piece of zombie art can become dead by losing all of its representational

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properties. Of course, representationalist definitions of art have fallen out of favour; in part because they classify non-representational art, e.g. minimalist art, as non-art. Nonetheless, the point still stands. Insofar as you subscribe to a traditional view, you can say that zombie art can become dead art by losing whatever aesthetic property it is you think confers art-status.

The main difficulty with this way of explaining dead art is that traditional definitions themselves are found wanting on grounds that no one has come up with a plausible aesthetic property possessed by the plurality of artefacts we now consider to be art. Troubling still, as aestheticians influenced by Wittgenstein point out, these artefacts might just be too diverse for there to be an aesthetic property, or even a set of properties, common to them all. If this is true, no satisfactory definition of art will be forthcoming.

I find myself sympathetic to this sort of scepticism. Nonetheless, it isn't clear to me why there mightn't be genre-specific classes of aesthetic properties that are relevant, even necessary, for making artefacts works of art - within the context of these genres. It seems *prima facie* plausible that representational properties are necessary to make 15th century perspectival paintings works of art. Similarly, it seems probable that expressive properties are necessary to make expressionist pieces works of art; properties that convey certain ideas might be necessary to make abstract pieces art, and so on. If there are such genre-specific aesthetic properties that are necessary to make artefacts work of arts, we can explain how zombie art can cease being art in virtue of their loss of these properties.

Zombie art lingers in the confines of insurance company claims inventories. Damaged, and assigned the grand sum of $0. Yet, on close inspection, we see that pieces like Dubuisson's *La Moisson*, Koon's *Balloon Dog*, and even Reinhardt's mucus-stained piece, arguably still have aesthetic value. In addition, we see that they are works that are at risk of losing their status as artworks if more

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damaged is allowed to occur. This means that institutions like the Salvage Art Institute, spearheaded by Krajewska, are performing a valuable service in providing a safe haven for zombie/salvage art, and by attempting to make them available to the public. If you don't believe me, go see and decide for yourself!

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