

Research Statement

Zachary Weinstein

My goal as a researcher is to give an account of the nature and value of our aesthetic practices. In my dissertation, I gave an account of a particular aesthetic practice: the creation, display, and appreciation of works of 'fine' visual art. I argued that this practice is essentially a form of communication between an artist and a beholder, gave an account of this form of communication, and argued that a central value of the practice is an interpersonal connection between an artist and a beholder that comes about through their communicative activity. Some of my current and future research continues this investigation. Another strand looks at underexplored aesthetic phenomena beyond fine art.

Current research

I have four papers that I plan to submit for publication in the near future. One is adapted from my dissertation. Two are on the nature of aesthetic appreciation: one offers a positive view, the other criticizes a recent popular view. The last is on a new topic: audience booing.

Seeing Together: Visual Art and the Value of Connection This paper is a development of a chapter of my dissertation. Many people take part in a practice of creating, displaying, and appreciating visual artworks. What is the value of this practice? I offer a novel account. Most extant accounts focus exclusively on the beholder, and propose that a beholder's engagement with an artwork has epistemic, moral, or hedonic value. This focus on the beholder has obscured a central value of this practice: a social connection between an artist and a beholder. I develop an account of this connection, on which an artist and a beholder engage in a joint activity I call *extended joint attention*. This joint activity constitutes a valuable interpersonal connection that explains much of the value of our artistic engagement.

Decomposing Pictures I give an account of art appreciation, drawing on the notion of *decomposition* from the literature on the format of representation in cognitive science. To understand a picture, a beholder must consider it as made up of significant parts. Just which parts are significant will depend on the purposes one has for engaging with a picture. The practice of art appreciation, however, prohibits an appreciator from approaching a picture with a determinate purpose. On the account I develop, art appreciation partially consists in considering different ways that a picture might be made up of significant parts, different ways those parts might have significance, and different 'overall' interpretations of the picture. I close with an interpretation of Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*, and some reflections on similarities between appreciating pictures and appreciating people.

Striving to Appreciate? I raise a problem for the 'striving view' of appreciation, recently defended by Thi Nguyen and Servaas van der Berg. The striving view holds that when we appreciate an object, we take up some 'first-order' goal, such as forming a correct aesthetic judgment or following a the play of counterpoint in a musical work, in order to achieve some second-order purpose, such as feeling pleasure or building community. Succeeding in the first-order goal is not important; the activity of pursuing the first-order goal is what realizes the second-order purpose. The striving

view imposes no constraints on the kind of second-order purpose one might pursue through engaging with an artwork. I present a series of cases where an idiosyncratic second-order purpose motivates engagement that is not plausibly appreciative. I end by suggesting that the appropriate second-order purpose for appreciating an object is constrained by the object of appreciation itself. Appreciation is partly constituted by determining what one's second-order purpose should be, which itself requires engaging with the object of appreciation.

A Plea for Boos I identify a species of booing, which I call 'proleptic booing', that deserves philosophical attention. In proleptic booing, an individual audience member boos intending to express not her individual disapproval, but the *audience's* collective disapproval. This might seem like an impossible feat, for two reasons. First, how can there be collective disapproval in the first place, if collective disapproval requires that everyone knows that everyone knows (and so on) that everyone disapproves? Second, how can an individual have the authority to express the audience's collective disapproval? I show how an individual's act of booing can bring about something close to collective disapproval, and how the individual boo-er can gain the authority to express the audience's collective disapproval after the fact, either through non-objection or through active endorsement by the audience. Proleptic booing is an interesting phenomena for the theory of speech acts, because it occupies an as-yet-unnoted position between an individual and a group speech act. Equally interesting is the *value* of proleptic booing within an aesthetic practice. I argue that the best reason to engage in proleptic booing is for its effect not on a performer, but on the audience itself. Booing is a way for an audience to express, and thus reinforce, its commitment to a shared standard of aesthetic achievement.

The first paper is included as my writing sample; drafts of the second and third paper are available on request. My draft of the fourth paper is not quite ready to be shared, but I would be excited to discuss it.

Future research

I have plans for an additional paper, and for a new research project. I offer a sketch of each.

Art, Meaning, and Metaphor This paper is about the relationship between the meaning of an artwork and of a metaphor. Arthur Danto, William Gass, Ted Cohen and others claim that the meaning of an artwork is structurally similar to the meaning of a metaphor: both a metaphor and an artwork ask an addressee to consider something in terms of something else. This comparison is motivated by the open-ended character of the meaning of both a metaphor and an artwork. A paraphrase of a metaphor requires an 'and so on'; the meaning of an artwork similarly resists succinct paraphrase. I argue that we need to look beyond metaphorical structure to account for the open-endedness of the meaning of a work of art. First, even if an artwork's meaning does have a metaphorical structure, the terms of that metaphor — what is to be considered in terms of what — are often themselves open-ended. Second, the very purpose of an artwork is itself open-ended, which creates further open-endedness for an attribution of the work's meaning.

Future research project: the aesthetics and moral psychology of celebration I am developing a new project on the nature of celebration and its connection to art and the aesthetic realm more generally. Artworks are often commissioned to celebrate people and events, and it's common for a critic to write that an artwork celebrates something or other. Here's an example from a recent review: 'Will Ryman's exhibition [...] celebrates the city's absurdity, vitality, grittiness, and beauty with ten sculptural works conceived as vignettes of street life.'¹ How can we cash out this kind of expression? In investigating this question, I have been surprised at how little philosophers have had to say about celebration. I am developing a view of celebration inspired by Hegel's aesthetics, on which celebration is a sensuously adequate — typically pleasurable — expression of something's value. Ryman's sculptures express the surprising *goodness* of New York's absurdity, vitality, grittiness, and beauty, through sensuous means; a wedding celebration expresses a couple's goodness through rather different sensuous means. I plan to develop a full account of the nature and function of celebration, arguing that celebration is essentially an aesthetic phenomenon. I hope the account will address a wide range of questions, including: Why do we look to art to celebrate people and events? What is the difference between celebrating, praising, and honoring? Under what conditions does someone have a reason to celebrate? What is the relationship between art's role in celebration and its purported role in social criticism?

¹Gillian Russo, review of Will Ryman: *New York, New York* at Chart Gallery, in *The Brooklyn Rail*. <https://brooklynrail.org/2022/10/artseen/Will-Ryman-New-York-New-York>