

ACTIONS IN ART

Brett Bourbon

University of Dallas

A few years ago, a group of five intrepid professors began to plan and design not just a new Encyclopedia of Art, but a new *kind* of Encyclopedia of Art. We had all spent years studying and writing about the philosophy of art, albeit in different ways and from different premises. But we all seemed to agree that art was not anything in particular, that it had neither necessary nor sufficient conditions. So we asked each other: “Shouldn’t we explore art through the contingent actions and practices that show how we care and live with it?” “Of course,” we answered, “we should.”

We called our new encyclopedia *Actions in Art*. The title rallied us against traditional philosophical ideas and traditions. We explained:

Our approach will not be from abstract categories or problems down to works of art, but we will work up from particular actions ... toward an understanding of how art means and exists in the details of our engagements with it.

Our inquiries were to begin with particulars, not abstractions. The particulars which would be our targets, however, were not to be objects or works of art. They would be actions, from which we hoped to discover how art “means and exists in the details of our engagement with it.” This was the key claim: art exists and means in and through our actions with it.

But what does it mean for art to exist in our engagements with it? In what sense does it exist in these engagements? [1] Is the point that art is constituted by such engagements? [2] Or that our engagements with art provide the context within which art exists (in which it is art for us)? The first claim is a kind of radical idealism that diminishes the properties and qualities of a particular work of art in favor of our constituting powers. The second is reasonable and hardly surprising, trivial in many ways—any work of art for me will exist (for me) in my relations with it. So our claim can seem either radical or trivial.

If, however, we really do deny that art is anything but a contingent category, and if we claim that art means as part of and through our engagements with it, then we are not far from the claim that art is constituted by our actions. This is the radical proposal. But since whatever is made by such actions remains a contingent thing, then art dissolves into our actions. If art is constituted by our actions, then actions are hardly in art: art is our actions. If we believe in the radical claim that actions constitute art, then our title was misleading.

I was not surprised by this threatening incoherence. Art is neither a clear nor determinate thing. The solution was not to assume a solution, but explore the particularities of our interaction with art in its contingent manifestations. We

made a list of the actions we wanted to investigate. We could have called it the forgotten and overlooked actions in art. We explained:

The sorts of actions to be addressed run from “straightening a picture” to “improvising” or “translating a poem,” from “judging a book by its cover,” to “waiting for the proper light,” as well as “playing in tune,” “choosing a seat,” “collecting,” or “crying because of art,” or “humming and whistling.”

With this list, and with the majority of the topics we chose, we foregrounded those subsidiary, seemingly trivial or secondary actions with which we engage with art. We wanted to find the art in the everyday, non-academic modes by which we approach art.

I was intrigued by the first action mentioned above: straightening a picture. Why that? I am not particularly tidy. I don’t mind pictures on the floor, nor do I need everything on the walls to be at right angles. But I love patterns of all kinds. Straightening a picture is a way of making a pattern. And it reminds me of how we see various patterns of lines in our everyday lives. I remember driving home late from teaching an evening seminar. I stopped at an intersection. Up ahead, I could see two sets of traffic lights: the first set right in front of me, the second 40 yards ahead across the overpass. The lights were in their nighttime blinking stop sign mode. The first set blinked at its rate and the further set blinked at theirs. As I waited I watched the pattern of their blinking relative to each other. I found that I couldn’t see them blink on in synchrony, but I could see them blink off in synchrony. The same blinking had an order and a disorder in my seeing. The events of the lights blinking made something in and through the contingencies and physiology of the action of my seeing.

As I drove on, I noticed light posts, sign posts and all sorts of vertical lines and objects. They made a forest of masts, some of them swaying at

times, an array of vectors and angles. This array had a charm and interest that the *mélange* of angles of misaligned paintings don’t usually have. Doorways, corners of rooms, furniture, cabinets and bookcases are hardly plumb or square or aligned with each other. But we do not usually find their misalignment distressing in the way we do crooked pictures on the wall. Straightening a picture involves us in an everyday way with symmetry and harmonies of angles and lines—it places us in the geometry of our everyday attempts to make order and make order raw, partial, and alive. It concerns geometric attunement, and the ways in which rectilinear ideals and assumptions founder amidst variation and interest.

But did any of this make straightening a picture an art (not simply a skill or a need)? I have a good eye, like I have a good ear, so I am good at straightening. Is having a good eye and exercising that talent for alignment an art, constitutive in some way to a specific art or aesthetic practice? Why not just call it a contribution to my artistic ability or my habits for tidiness? The activity and experience of straightening a picture, no matter how pleasant, seems hardly a form of art. I straighten a picture and say and feel, “Ah, that’s right”; isn’t that akin to hearing the rightness of the “Ad faciem” that ends Buxtehude’s *Membra Jesu nostri* (BuxWV75)? It seems reasonable to consider both the sense of rightness (and relief) I feel when I straighten a picture as an aesthetic experience like that I experience when I hear and feel the rightness of certain moments in music. Each might involve other considerations; some people need a certain order in the rooms they live in for reasons of personality and habit. They may feel some other kind of rightness than what I feel in both the right configuration of a picture and in the right resolution of a piece of music. Circularity is always threatening with art.

The lights and their blinking were functional, but they also decorated the world with rhythm and repetition. My attention to pattern informs

my thoughts about straightening pictures. My actions in (or with) art dissolve into my personal attitudes towards order and disarray and into ideas about the art of my seeing, the art in my actions (not the actions in my art).

In my case, my interest in symmetries and asymmetries, those revealed by my seeing patterns and responding to dislevelments, get formalized in art. My interest in symmetry gets formalized into the complex patterns tiled on the walls at the palace of Alhambra. My attraction to dislevelment and asymmetry gets sublimed in the doodling abstractions of Cy Twombly.

None of this shows yet that straightening a picture is a constituent building block of the arts of symmetry and asymmetry. Only that there is a relationship between this mundane task and various visual aesthetics. Clifford Still imagines that the vertical line and verticality embody our humanity or humanness. He makes a myth of the vertical. Is his an art that gives our need for straightening a purity of form?

Straightening is certainly an action. It could be part of some greater practice of orderliness, although it need not be. Such a commitment to orderliness could become an aesthetic, which would also be an ethic, a way of living. I could commit my life to tasks of straightening. I could become the Johnny Appleseed of making plumb.

This is all inconclusive as an argument about the action of straightening in the visual arts. It does suggest, however, that all these kinds of making straight or keeping crooked can be part of practices, some of which we might call art and others not. It is hard to talk about actions in art without talking about actions in practices. Any action can seem already part of a practice, if practices are understood to involve a set of actions organized relative to understood goals and norms. For example, the action of straightening something, including paintings, is motivated and fits with various norms of orderliness, decoration, visual art, and so forth. Straightening has a place in these practices and habits. But it does

not mean that it needs to have a place or that its place makes the art mean what it does (if it does) or exist as it does.

Straightening a picture was cousin to another topic in our list of actions, another action best understood as a practice: playing in tune. Playing in tune requires learning how to play an instrument, and thus to learn to play certain pieces of music. A piano may be in tune, but if I play a piece badly, shifting in and out of the appropriate harmonies, then I will play out of tune. In playing classical violin, one faces even greater tuning challenges, since each note one plays is open to the variabilities of finger placement. On the other hand, with blues and rock, with their traditions of bending notes, modulations in tune and imperfect tuning are part of their power. Such observations offer *prima facie* reasons to think that ideas about playing in tune (or not) constitute in some way and to some degree various arts of music. But this is to suggest that we learn to play in tune (or not) when we learn to play music. Even if ideas of straightness and verticality are involved in our ideas of art, we do not learn how to straighten a picture when we learn how to paint. “Playing in tune” and “straightening a picture” play different roles in the practices of art of which they are a part. So our examples of actions in our encyclopedia were of different kinds, and these actions mattered relative to the practices of which they were a part.

Those practices, however, were ill-defined. How to value straightening a picture or playing in tune would always depend on anyone’s personal commitments, beliefs, attitudes, personality, and so on. In trying to get to art through the particularities of our actions we would always be in danger of turning our philosophical concerns into anthropological confessions. We would be our own guinea pigs. How should we generalize from our own experience or examples?

For example, let’s say that someone wants to examine falling in love with a book. Is falling in love an action? It isn’t a practice, unless it’s

pathological. But is it really an action? It might be better described as an event—non-intentional, accidental, something that happens. But let’s set that aside.

One might ask what does it mean to fall in love with a book as opposed to a person, a tree, a thought? To answer that question we would have to do some philosophy, that is, some conceptual clarifications. It would require making the relevant distinctions among these objects as targets or causes of our love—and determining the meaning of the kinds of love they induce. It might be useful.

But that is a hard thing to do. Easier to ask—why do I love this book or these books? What would count as an answer? My personal needs, some kind of confession? But that makes it all too personal, too much a question of taste, and too arbitrary. So this has to be disguised. What better disguise than to make the personal general: and so psychological motives and experience are generalized.

One way of disguising the unwarranted generalizing of one’s taste is to characterize the objects of your love relative to your taste, asking, in this case, why these are the books I love by asking instead, “What makes these books lovable?”

There is no way, however, to determine why these books are lovable—the *why* is too vague. And it is likely that there is more than one reason, motive or cause; and how could their roles be determined and distinguished, prioritized and tested?

It is not clear that we love for reasons, anyway. So personal experience gets bolstered by diagnosis, psychological theories, and an anecdotal sociology. None of this is really philosophy.

This does not mean that our project was impossible, just fraught with danger. There is an excellent way of examining our practices with art. One great example is provided by the art critic and iconoclast David Hickey. In his essay “Art Collectors,” he writes:

The decorum of communicating through the medium of an object has a quiet, cowboy courtesy about it, like wranglers sitting around a campfire talking into the flames, and it suits me. Also, I love the waft, flutter, and filigree of desire, insight, self-revelation, and sublimation. (142).

This has the right mix of critique, anthropology and psychology—the action of talking through and about art embodies a certain ethos, and produces a particular kind of conversation—the kind he characterizes as “the waft, flutter, and filigree of desire, insight, self-revelation, and sublimation.” I would commission Hickey to write the *Actions in Art* entry for “The Art of Talking around a Campfire.” Such an entry would be an exploration of the art in an action or practice, not an exploration of an action in an art.

Hickey calls what he does “communicating through the medium of an object.” Through such communication art would be revealed. The action of communication is not in the art, but the art is a means of communicating. We might want to change our title to “Actions through the medium of Art,” a less catchy one, but possibly more true. If we have to discover how art exists in the details of our engagements, then we should not assume we know what art is ahead of time. Certainly, the conventions that say a novel is a novel and that it is art are contested and without any secure warrant. To dissolve any particular kind of art I just have to believe it isn’t art. But if my belief makes it art, then art is a pretty trivial thing. You might believe in God, but if you imagine that your belief in God makes God, that is no God I would believe in. And the same with art.

This does not mean that art is necessarily mere belief, but that it is a contested kind of thing; its *status as something* has to be discovered and determined. Is art mere belief, habit, and cultural prejudice?

With that question in mind, I could not begin my own entry to our encyclopedia with art, I had to end with it. I could not look at a practice rela-

tive to an established sense of art, nor could I simply look at how art exists in some specific practice; I had to determine if art existed and as what.

I could assume, of course, that a picture existed that sometimes needs to be straightened, but I couldn't assume that straightening a picture was part of the art of visual painting, nor even that it was a part of the art of looking at paintings (but I could assume it was part of the art of keeping things orderly). I would have to discover *what art* was involved with *that action*, and I couldn't assume ahead of time what that art would be.

Maybe falling in love with a book made that book art or maybe not; but I couldn't test that by looking at the books I fall in love with and categorizing them as real art and not-art. The consequence of that exercise would not be a surprise anyway—I would love both real art and non-art, and for various reasons. If I discovered certain qualities that make a book lovable, that is just as much a confession of what I find lovable as it is a description of a set of qualities of that book. What is lovable hangs free over nothing; and those qualities are bound to my descriptions, and those descriptions will have all sorts of war-rants and bases.

So I could not look at actions in art, but I had to discover *the art in certain actions*: I had to take art as the unknown and begin with actions. I began with the actions of seeing and forgetting.

Lawrence Weschler uses a sentence, attributed to Valéry, as a way of characterizing the visual art of Robert Irwin. The sentence is “Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees.” I don't want to determine if this is a true statement, I just want to show that it is *the right kind of statement*; that it is an example of finding *the art in the action*.

Seeing, which might not seem like an intentional action in the way that opening a door might be, is for both Valéry and Irwin a practice, which means, you can get better at it, it requires both skill and disposition. Weschler's sentence

suggests as much: “Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees.” What is claimed here is that seeing requires a further action, which is forgetting, construed again as something to accomplish, in order for seeing to happen.

This is not any forgetting, but a forgetting through discipline, through honing the eye. Forgetting, in this case, is the inverse of the art and action of remembering; we can try to remember and we can try to forget.

Irwin's discipline of seeing does not have as its goal an escape from conceptualization and into pure experience; the optical effects that can be so striking in his work rely on our expectations, that is, our *de facto* conceptualizations. Our eye is surprised. Such surprises do not break us free from our conceptual understanding, but they challenge how we rely and fit and participate with our ways of understanding. Irwin describes one of his aesthetic transformations of space at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art. At the back of the space at the Museum, Irwin found a rather strange empty room. He says:

So this room had a white ceiling, white walls, whitish floor, and a white pole in the middle, and the only other element in the room was the kick board, a molding that skirted the edge of three walls ... this baseboard was painted jet black ... What I did in the situation was that about six feet into the space I took a piece of black tape, about five inches wide, and laid it out across the floor; horizontally so that it picked up the black line and made a rectangle. (Weschler, 176-77)

Roberta Smith described the striking effect: “The area was transformed into a separate volume; it seemed to lift out of the museum and become so exclusively visual that it could have been almost any size” (Weschler, 177). A single piece of black tape transformed a room into a space that both enthralled and confused people. Irwin recalled that:

... people approached the room in the back very unsure of the ground they were on. Some people would not cross the line; ... a lot of people stuck their hand out to make sure they weren't going to bump into something, as if there were a glass pane there, or as if the room were somehow solid. (Weschler, 177)

To forget the name of a thing (a particular kind of aphasia) alters how we relate to the things we see and to our own understanding. But this aphasia is not an affliction, but an opportunity. Our forgetting the name of the thing we see resists our tendency to absorb what we see into our identification of it (names help us identify). Forgetting the name of something (as if refusing the power to domesticate things into objects) resists the subsumption of our practice of seeing under the concept of referring. We can still refer, by pointing or by saying, "that thing, there"; but refusing the orientation offered by names and naming allows for a different kind of intimacy with what we see (this intimacy need not be called a perceptual or aesthetic experience: there is nothing pure about it). This intimacy is a recovery of wonder, of seeing with surprise.

In seeing this way, we have simplified ourselves into the activity of our looking. In this simplification the art in our seeing (the practice of seeing better) has become a seeing of art (the revelation of that practice and potential). And this shows how this is the right kind of statement, if we are trying to understand how our actions and practices reveal or make art. Because in this case a way of seeing becomes a seeing of art—what art is gets defined by a particular kind of action and practice, which can itself be characterized in different ways.

This is the key. Not all seeing is art, only certain ways of seeing. There is no non-tendentious justification for why that way of seeing counts as art, but it suggests (it doesn't prove) that whatever we take as visual art (defined appropriately) is found in distinctive ways of seeing. Seeing is

something most of us do, but we too often do it inadequately; we project, assume, distort, overlook. So Irwin makes his art in order *to both find and learn the art in seeing*: he makes art so that something can happen such that *the practice of seeing* reveals *the art that is its quality and excellence*.

There are many ways of doing this and many different arts to make or reveal in this way. For example, Irwin comments: "As far as I am concerned, a folk art is when you take a utilitarian object, something you use every day, and you give it overlays of your own personality, what it is you feel and so forth. You enhance it with your life" (Weschler, 21). In the context of someone's life, folk art matters because it is a means of personal expression (an expression of personality), a way of living within a community or relative to an idea of oneself. It constitutes a commitment to aesthetic and personal expression, using the means established within a particular community.

Outside of the folk artist's community (and folk art can simply be one's house), that expression matters as an example of a way of living and a way of caring. Irwin generalizes that way of living and caring into an exploration and highlighting of our ways of seeing as human beings. He does not generalize his personality, he generalizes the care and investment in the making of certain things, everyday things. The circumstances and environment of our living shine with the possibilities of our seeing. This is an example of art *in* a particular human practice.

Loving a book is a kind of folk art, as well. It collects us in our care for it. Our love expresses our personality, but we also share that love and that book with others, even if we do not know those who share our love for it. The love may happen for reasons we never understand, but the action of the book's art demands a further art in our actions with it. What should we do now with this book we love? Our life will be the answer.

My general sense is that one cannot do any art if one does not understand the art in our

human actions. For Irwin that means art becomes an action (an attempt) to recover an art. If we think of art, as Irwin does, as a means of actualizing an art nascent in our everyday actions, then formal art is a means of recovering everyday art. This returns us to our title—*Actions in*

Art, because the *actions in art* are just those that recover the *art in actions*. Or rather, our actions with art matter when they recover the art in our actions, and not otherwise.

VERSÃO PORTUGUESA ➔

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Hickey, David. *Pirates and Farmers: Essays on Taste*. NY: Ram Publication, 2013.
- Weschler, Lawrence. *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 2009.