

DOMINIC MCIVER LOPES

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ASAGE (Michel-Antoine Xhignesse): Could you briefly recap the thesis of *Beyond Art* for those of our readers who haven't made it through the book yet?

Dominic McIver Lopes (DL): The thesis of the book is really that the best approach to studying works of art from a philosophical perspective is not as works of art, not under the umbrella of art, but rather as works of some—or some set of—specific art forms or art kinds. So the best approach to studying any given work is not as a work of art but as a painting, music, or maybe as horror, or even as the baroque. So, really, the book is about methodology. I was interested in trying to work out in a systematic way, in a philosophical way, what is the right question to ask, and I was interested in trying to find out how we can know that's the right question. There's been a methodological turn in philosophy and I was interested in that, and I was thinking about how thinking more methodologically might benefit our field, aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

A: One of this book's most admirable features, I think, is that although theories of art ultimately come in for a pretty big hit—their prospects end up looking pretty dim—all the work that's been done on them doesn't end up getting dismissed. Instead, you argue that we should re-couch all those efforts in terms of theories of the arts rather than as a single theory of art. So it's still entirely possible to give explanations of the arts in institutional, or cluster, or historical terms, or what have you. And so we don't end up with any real "system" of the arts because there's no requirement of uniformity among explanations of various arts. But at the same time, I can't help but wonder if we might not be able to rehabilitate a theory of art from the rubble of the arts. So what would happen if, for example, one were able to give an institutional account of all the various arts? Wouldn't we then have grounds for rehabilitating something like an institutional theory of art?

DL: Let me say a bunch of things. Some readers will get the impression that I'm an anti-essentialist, that I'm opposed to theories of art and theories of what makes an item a work of art. Actually, I'm not; I have a theory of art. I distinguish between buck-passing and buck-stopping theories of art. A buck-*passing* theory of art, that's the kind of theory that I advocate: what makes an item a work of art is whether it's an item in one of the art kinds. And so it says that the heavy theoretical lifting is not done by it trying to answer the question "what makes this thing a work of art?" but rather by trying to answer "what makes this thing a painting, or a song?". So what comes in for a bit of a hit is buck-*stopping* theories of art and these are the theories that we're all familiar with: Beardsley, Danto, Dickie, Levinson, and Carroll, and so on.

You're absolutely right to say that I believe that the resources that are brought to bear by those buck-stopping theories of art can be redirected in a buck-passing way to understand specific arts. And so, really, the hit on buck-stopping theories of art is a hit on their ambitions rather than on the materials that they bring to bear, which I think are excellent. It's just a question of what we're asking them to do, and I think we're asking them to do too much. So I'm glad to see that you don't think I'm trying to dismiss this grand literature that we've developed in the last few decades in analytic aesthetics.

But then your other question is, isn't it possible that once we have theories of these individual arts we'll see that they have this commonality, and one of these buck-stopping theories of art is vindicated? I don't have an argument against that possibility. It is a possibility, but I don't think the prospects are good. And the reason I don't think the prospects are good is this idea I have that the current literature is at an impasse. It seems to me that this impasse is fundamental: it goes really deep, deeper than our theoretical commitments, so it's shaping those theoretical commitments. The impasse is basically between those who think that nothing but say-so or institutional facts are sufficient for making something into a work of art and those who think that there are some set of manifest qualities (aesthetic or other) that are necessary to make something a work of art.

This is an impasse because it's not just that we have two different theories and the question is which theory best interprets the data; rather, I think that the data are our intuitions, and intuitions are driving the theory, so we can't use intuitions to test the theory. So in that situation I don't see a way forward, and I don't see that having looked at the individual arts it's very likely that intuitions are suddenly going to line up very clearly. One of the methodological benefits of the buck-passing approach is that it does say that maybe one style of theory is better for one art-form, and another for another art-form. I think there's a lot to be said for an aesthetic theory of music for example, or an institutional theory of literature, like Peter Lamarque's. And that will tell us a lot about music and literature, but it's not going to mend the fences between those who warmly welcome *Brillo* boxes and those who think they're a hoax.

A: In passing the buck to media, you obviously don't mean that an object's bare physical medium, the material stuff of which it's made, is responsible for its being art; instead, the culprit is the appreciative practice in which the work is located. It sounds like you have in mind something like what Joseph Margolis called a work's "artistic" medium or what Timothy Binkley referred to as "conventions". Could you say a bit more about what you mean in terms of passing the buck to these appreciative practices, and especially about the role that intentions play in locating a work within an appreciative practice?

DL: So, first just an observation that follows on what I said in response to your previous question. When we focus attention on art rather than on the specific arts, one of the mistakes that it's very easy for us to make is that we generalize from facts about the specific arts to all the arts. And I think this is something that we see in writing about art media—maybe not so much in philosophy, though it happens in philosophy as well. But certainly in art theory. Big debates in art theory begin with a conception of medium that really comes from visual art, and then they generalize to all of the arts. And I think that that's a symptom of not keeping clear the distinction between the two levels and being careful about what work should be done at what level.

So the notion of medium that I develop is meant to push back against the narrow conception of medium as material, just material. And I really think of medium as what's physical or symbolic stuff and what it has come to for art given the competences that we've developed. A simpler way to put that, and this is the way I put it in the book, is that a medium is a 'technical resource'. So there's some resource in the world plus a set of techniques for bringing out features of that resource that are useful to us in some way. This is a very broad conception of a medium and it's not a conception of a specifically artistic medium. So water and rivers are the technical resources for producing electricity, given that we can build dams, turbines, and power transmission lines, and so on. So you have the stuff, you have the techniques for unlocking what's latent in the stuff.

In the philosophy of art, those who have been interested in medium have usually tried to characterize an artistic medium. And since I'm a buck-passer, I don't want to go there. So then what do I do? I've got this very broad notion of a technical resource, and I want to tie it to the specific art forms. So what I say is that there are appreciative practices, which themselves are not limited to art (fashion, wallpaper, and automobile design are appreciative practices, and there are also appreciative practices around nature although they have to be handled with a slightly different framework than the one I develop for artifacts). So when it comes to artifacts, we have these appreciate kinds and what they basically are, if we just focus on the case of the arts, is a set of norms that establish what the good-making features of the technical resources are. So they're a set of evaluative norms.

Take ink on paper as a very simple example. Ink on paper is a technical resource used in drawing in one way to unlock a set of good-making/bad-making features, and used in book production to unlock another set of good-making/bad-making features. And that's just because we have different practices with different norms centered on features of that very same medium. So people say, "OK, we're going to use this technical resource in a particular way, and we're going to strive to use it to create items that realize these good-making features and that avoid those bad-making features." Not necessarily aesthetically good/bad-making, it could be good/bad-making at another level; so any kind of value. Some artistic appreciative kinds will involve aesthetic norms but I'm not committed to the idea that all do.

OK, so then you had a question about intentions. I think it's an open question, actually, whether participation in a practice must be intended. So there may be an appreciative practice of outsider art, and I think it's essential to outsider art, if it is an appreciative practice, that participants in the practice—at least creative contributors to the practice (what we would call the artists)—are not intending to contribute to that particular practice. They're just intending to make cool things to decorate their homes, or they're intending to offload their feelings, dazzle their neighbours... whatever it is that outsider artists do, there's tons of intentions in there. They may be intending to paint, or to sculpt, or to make installations, to change their landscape... they will have some intentions, but they needn't be intentions that are tied to that particular appreciative practice. I do think that all making of artifacts is intentional, but there's a very tricky question about the relationship between what you intend, and the practices you're engaging in.

A: On a related note, then, you've argued convincingly here, and in the article "Art without 'art'" that theories of art and concepts can come apart to the point where the making of art doesn't depend on or require a concept of art. Do you think that line of argument applies all the way down to art-media, so that making something that belongs to an art-kind doesn't require a concept of that kind?

DL: I think it does go all the way down. In philosophy, we've come to accept, since Kripke and Putnam in the early '70s, that there is be a gap between our concepts of natural kinds and our theories of natural kinds. So our concept of water need not represent water as H₂O; nevertheless, we have a concept of water. But water is H₂O, that's the theory of water.

But also, it's widely assumed, at least in philosophy of art, that when it comes to social kinds the pre-Kripke consensus still holds, so that what it is to be literature is what our concept of literature represents it to be. There is no gap, or it's a very small gap, between our concept of literature and what literature is. And here philosophy is out of step, actually, with art scholarship, where it's widely held that we can be fundamentally mistaken about the nature of the thing that we are dealing with. It's a big theme of post-structuralist criticism of all the various arts over the last few decades that we can get

these things fundamentally wrong. And I think that it would be really good for philosophers of art to take on board that kind of initial skeptical stance that allows for the likelihood that our concepts don't perfectly match with reality. This is really helpful because it can enable us to see how somebody can be making a work that fits into a kind even though that kind may not have been cognitively available to them at that time. They may have been trying to do something else, to paint figuratively, but in fact be making abstract painting even though abstract painting was unimaginable to them.

A: Do you think, then, that media differ across time and space? I guess I'm wondering whether the appeal to medium ends up privileging Western and post-eighteenth-century art practices and work-concepts, or whether sculpture and mask-making, Western and Balinese music, fresco and cave painting all belong to different appreciative practices, and therefore to different arts.

DL: It's very important to think of appreciative practices as nesting in a non-Aristotelian way. So the nesting, if you were to draw it, would not be like a tree with no crossing branches: there are crossing branches all over the place. So if we start with the technical resource, does it change over time? Sure it does. A resource of architecture is elevators, and there were no elevators in the eighteenth century, and that gave us skyscrapers, so it's hugely important. So the resources change over time. The techniques for accessing what the resources afford also develop over time, we invent them. So that changes over time too. And then the norms that determine what we're aiming for in using those technical resources, they also change over time. All of these things change over time.

Does this mean that we just have this fluid, unstructured reality with no joints at which we can carve? No, because we do have some nesting. So we can think of painting in 1923. What are the material resources available, the techniques available, what are painters trying to do in Holland in *De Stijl* at that time? Or we can go up a level, to early twentieth century painting in Europe, or we can go up another level, to painting across all time and cultures. And then we're looking at a very broad class of technical resources and a whole set of norms. And these norms may have something in common—maybe they're all about surface and vigour. There are some interesting things to say about this whole set of norms of painting that are different from the norms of, say, house-painting. We can still distinguish between the painterly (in the artistic sense) use of the medium and technical resources and the non-artistic (e.g. house-painterly) sense of the technical resource of painting.

A: Do we even need theories of the arts, then? It seems as though we can just pass the buck right back to theories of appreciative practices.

DL: At the end of the day, I think that our engagement with art is so mysterious. This is a very strange thing that we do. It shouldn't be that hard to put ourselves in a perspective where we can see how bizarre and alien it is. Just think of a nineteenth-century composer watching people walking down the street with ipods plugged into their ears and nodding their heads. What this? It's very strange behaviour—of course, once we immerse ourselves in these behaviours, they become natural to us. At the end of the day, we want to understand why we do this, why it matters, what its value is. So we need to learn some things about the appreciative practices in which we engage. And that means learning something about the material, techniques, and norms. And why not at all levels? It's important to know that there's something in common between the various traditions of the blues. What's in common between them tells you something about each of those traditions. You're not going to have a full understanding of the St. Louis blues if you don't understand the blues. So I think that we need both the bottom level, and we need the very highest level. Now, you may ask me then, "why not also 'art'?" And it's because there is no material of art, there is no technique of art that isn't a technique of some specific

art, and there's no set of norms that's unique to just the arts and all of the arts. So I think that the top level is below the level of art. We get theoretical informativeness from there on down.

A: For some time now you've been in charge of compiling the ASA's graduate guide to aesthetics in North America. What do you think of the state of aesthetics in North America?

DL: It depends on how you read that question. Aesthetics is thriving and booming. I think it's the most exciting time ever. I'm not a historian—I don't have too many historical bones in my body—but one of the things that I had to do in writing *Beyond Art* was try to understand the history of aesthetics, especially analytic aesthetics although I do talk about the early modern period and nineteenth-century a little bit. So I've reflected a bit on this, and I think there's just so much terrific work breaking new ground so rapidly right now. Drawing on the best tools newly invented in other areas of philosophy (in the philosophy of language, value theory, philosophy of mind, epistemology, history of philosophy, etc.), and because we feel that if we're going to write on painting, or music, or dance we need to understand those non-philosophical literatures, we're also benefiting from our reading outside philosophy in a way that I don't think you see a lot of before the 1980s. And the result of this is that if you just open the pages of JAAC and you look through the general philosophy journals, you'll see terrific work being done. And our students are amazing.

When I came into the profession (I graduated in 1992) my first ASA meeting was in 1993 and there was me and Crispin Sartwell. There were two of us who were new, and that was it for years and years and years: the next person to come along was Matthew Kieran. So that has completely changed. There are plenty of students and they're doing great work—scary-great work. So all of this is good news.

We also know that there is an underrepresentation of philosophers of art, philosophers working in aesthetics, in North American graduate programs. So I worry about the long-term future of the sub-discipline without strong representatives of the sub-discipline in the very best graduate programs. There are some, but there aren't enough, and without that I think we're going to find we're facing challenges. The situation in Britain is different, there's aesthetics everywhere in Britain and it's integrated into philosophy much more closely than it is here. And I think that the ASA is the body that should be addressing this—and it is doing that in some ways, but there's more that needs to be done. Anybody reading this: please, if you have any ideas, let us know because we have the resources to implement good ideas!

A: You've said in the past that aesthetics/philosophy of art is a fairly new discipline that's only just coming of age. How do you see its role in relation to other philosophical sub-disciplines? Should one be some other kind of philosopher first, and an aesthetician/philosopher of art second?

DL: I think that we *have* to be other philosophers first, because there is no set of tools that are unique to and distinctive of aesthetics. What I mean is, when you do aesthetics, you're always doing some other kind of philosophy at the same time. It's impossible to just be doing aesthetics. You are also doing the same thing as what meta-ethicists do, philosophers of language do, philosophers of mind do, as what epistemologists and metaphysicians do, or the same thing as what historians of ethics, or metaphysics, or what have you are doing. You're always already doing one of those things, and you're always already using that training. I think the best philosophers of art are simply the best philosophers, and I think we need to keep this in mind.

The difficulty is that, like philosophers of science, we need to master an extensive and sophisticated literature outside philosophy. So no self-respecting philosopher of science just does philosophy of science—they also do philosophy of physics, or philosophy of biology, or what have you, and they know their scientific literatures, they know them intimately, and they know them from the inside. And we have to have the same kind of reach, and that imposes a kind of burden on us that distances us a bit from core philosophy where philosophers, for the most part, don't need to have this big outside knowledge. And that's a challenge that we face, and that's what I think sometimes makes us feel a little bit like outsiders to philosophy in general. Philosophers science have told me they feel the same way. So I think that we should take heart that we're not alone in this. And some philosophers of psychology/philosophers of mind, or the kinds of philosophers of mind who are really immersed in the psychological and neuro-scientific literature, they can feel the same way as well.

A: So what do you think, then, are the primary challenges (sociological, philosophical, or otherwise) facing aesthetics/philosophy of art today?

DL: Well, I think that the most important thing is that we move the boundaries of knowledge forward. And the challenges there are just the challenges faced by any enquirer, to find the best tools and to use them adroitly and boldly. I do sometimes feel that the philosophy of art is relatively conservative as a sub-discipline and I think there is room for making a better study of what's going on in other areas of philosophy and just borrowing, stealing, and using those resources so that we can answer the questions that we want to answer. The institutional challenges are just what I said earlier: really, I think the core challenge is hiring into graduate programs. I understand that young people face the challenge of just getting a job, period, but if we're thinking about the sub-discipline and its long-term prosperity, we have to be thinking about hiring in the graduate programs, hiring people who can train future generations.

A: One last question, then. Do you have any advice for graduate students working in, or hoping to work in, aesthetics or the philosophy of art?

DL: Yeah, remember that you are philosophers and that first you're doing philosophy and you should always be doing some other kind of philosophy as well as aesthetics because you will be a far better philosopher of art if you do that. So don't get narrow. I think that narrowness is more harmful to a philosopher than it is to most other kinds of researchers. We depend on a kind of creativity that comes from just looking around and seeing what other people are doing, seeing the moves that they make and considering whether copying those moves might be useful. And ask new questions! We do tend to worry a few issues to death, and it's time to move on, and the next generation are the people who should be pushing us to move on.

Dominic McIver Lopes is a Distinguished University Scholar and Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of British Columbia., as well as past president of the American Society for Aesthetics. He has written five monographs: *Four Arts of Photography* (Wiley forthcoming), *Beyond Art* (OUP 2014), *A Philosophy of Computer Art* (Routledge 2009; winner of the ASA's Outstanding Monograph Prize), *Sight and Sensibility* (Oxford 2005), and *Understanding Pictures* (Oxford 1996). His work spans areas such as pictorial representation and perception, the aesthetic and epistemic value of pictures and scientific images, theories of art and its value, the ontology of art, and computer art and new art forms. His current work is on aesthetic values and aesthetic agency.