

The Perfect Dinner Party

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For my perfect dinner party I have chosen three very distinguished guests: Immanuel Kant, Charles Darwin, and Marcel Duchamp. I am sure that they need no further introduction. It is not an exclusive party; anyone taking the time to read this is, of course, very welcome to join us. One of my guests, M. Duchamp, might perhaps, appear at the party in two personas, both as himself and as his alter-ego 'Rose Selavy' (a name which when said out loud, slurringly, conjures the phrase *Eros c'est la vie* [Eros is life], and resonates with what I am about to discuss). I will show a few examples of my work to illustrate certain points (or points of departure) raised within this paper, but please understand that these drawings are somewhat out of place and are best encountered in their online context.¹

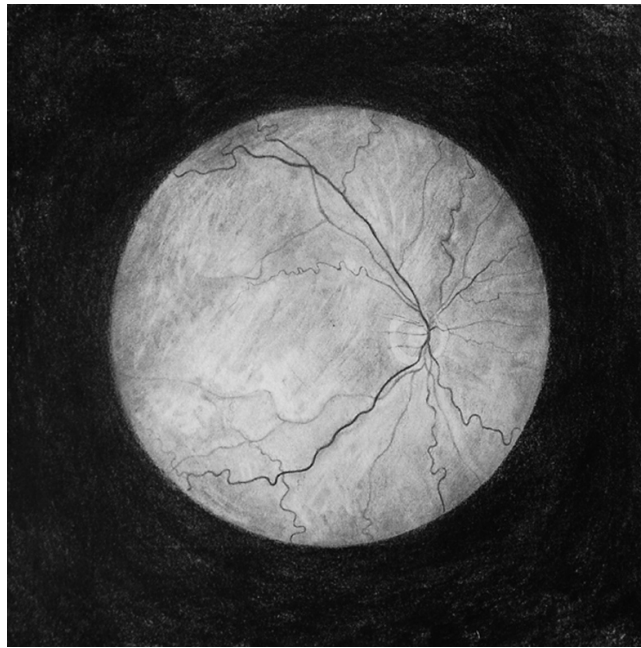
Why invite these three august members of our species to share our table? To answer this question, I would like to begin with a quotation from Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, 'Beauty has purport and significance only for human beings, for beings at once animal and rational'.²

Although many might take issue with this anthropocentric view (how can we really *know* whether beauty has purport and significance only for human beings?), this statement does help to connect the two key topics that I would like to discuss.³ By describing human beings as both animal and rational, by referring to human nature, Kant connects biology and culture. Two ideal subjects for dinner party conversation, set in the context of our biological need for food and drink and our intellectual need for stimulating conversation. In this paper I would like to address the animal and the rational as they are brought together in the human species, *Homo sapiens sapiens* (the name comes from Latin, meaning the *wise man*, the only extant member of the Hominidae, the *Homo* genus of primates in the great ape family). Though this title (and this lineage) does sound rather grand, the more we learn about the animal brain the more it appears that our privileged status in nature can be questioned. Philip Hoare, for example, quotes Hal Whitehead, an expert on cetaceans, in his excellent book *LEVIATHAN or The Whale*: 'There is a growing recognition that culture is not an exclusive property of humans'.⁴

This relatively recent questioning of our privileged position in nature, founded on religious notions of human beings' sacred role in the cosmos, seems particularly pertinent at this stage in our history, in an epoch that has been termed the Anthropocene, when our influence on the living planet is currently under such critical scrutiny.

I would like to propose a number of connections between the thinking or cultural output of my three guests. They already share a number of obvious sexual and ethnic characteristics: Kant, Darwin, and Duchamp are all men, all white European and, due to the influence of the hormone testosterone, they all share a greater or lesser tendency towards male pattern baldness. They also each reflect or represent three personal interests: philosophy, biology, and art. Let us begin with biology. We are after all biological beings. If it were not for our natural functions we would not be sitting here today, imaginatively enjoying the delights of our perfect dinner party, eating being the hard-wired pleasure that it is. Conversation is also a hard-wired, psychological human need, something from which we derive pleasure – biology (and psychology) thus provide the true context for any dinner party.

We might connect biology to art and philosophy through the work of Charles Darwin, an extraordinary polymath with a profound interest in aesthetics. We can perhaps sense the influence of his readings of Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses* in his descriptions of the eye markings, or *ocelli*, on the wings of the Argus pheasant (which did not go unnoticed by John Ruskin, who hotly disputed the notion of a female pheasant *appreciating* the beauty of these markings⁵) or when, during his voyage on the HMS Beagle (writing of brightly-coloured sea shells collected off the island of Tenerife) he asks why, 'so much beauty should be apparently created for such little purpose'.⁶ Of course the teleology here is sex; sexual selection as the origin of the aesthetic sense. Darwin's big idea came through observation – from what entered his eyes on his journeys, and through his studies.



In this drawing, entitled *Orbit*, I wanted to celebrate the primacy of biological vision and explore what happens when an image enters the *camera obscura* of the eye, a complex structure that still retains a certain controversial legacy from a time when evolution was considered a theory rather than a fact (it is still held up by some as an example of ‘intelligent design’). I had a photograph taken of the back of my eye and recreated the surface of my retina on a sheet of paper; as I drew, the surface I was seeing on thus took form on a separate surface. I wanted to connect the act of seeing with the act of drawing in a very direct, physical, embodied way.

Darwin’s ocular experiences of the natural world are often closely followed by questions. I quote him again, this time reflecting on the human desire to classify, from *On the Origin of Species*, ‘Naturalists try to arrange the species, genera and families in each class on what is called the natural system. But what is meant by this system?’.⁷

Much of my recent creative practice (which is systematic, to a greater or lesser degree) deals with our relationships with nature and primarily with our connections to biology and the animal kingdom. When I first began to work with this material, I was drawn to a wonderful little sketch from Darwin’s notebooks: a simple branching dendrogram consisting of a few lines with crossed T-shapes at their terminations. The words ‘I think’, scribbled above the diagram, perhaps mirror Rene Descartes’s philosophical statement *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am), a statement with perhaps more than a hint of anthropocentric *reductio*, given Descartes’s religious justifications for his philosophy.

To coincide with Darwin’s bicentenary, in early 2009, I began an online drawing project. I used a version of Darwin’s diagram to connect the various drawings on the web site, though in fact the connections between the separate works are deliberately fragile and far from linear. 2009 also saw the publication of *The Art Instinct* by Dennis Dutton. In *The Art Instinct* Dutton proposes a Darwinian approach to art theory, connecting aesthetics and criticism with an understanding of human nature derived from the cognitive and biological sciences. He proposes that art is a universal instinct and part of our evolutionary heritage. Dutton’s book connects human biology (through psychology, the mental manifestations of what the brain does through its hard wired activity) philosophy, and art. The book offers a critique of institutional art theory as defined by Arthur Danto, ‘To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld’.⁸ And as further refined by George Dickie:

A work of art in the classificatory sense is 1) an artefact 2) upon which some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld) has

conferred the status of candidate for appreciation.⁹

I suppose that, by the very fact that you are reading this, then I am such a candidate for appreciation (and I am grateful for that), but I am worried by the reductive (perhaps even tautological) qualities of these definitions.

In *The Art Instinct* Dutton quotes the Roman playwright Terence, '*Homo Sum: humani nil a alinum puto*' (I am a man and nothing is alien to me). This could be an ideal motto for anyone seeking universal truths underlying cultural differences across the globe and throughout time. Steven Pinker in *The Language Instinct* writes:

Knowing about the ubiquity of complex language across individuals, no speech seems foreign to me even though I don't understand a word ... I imagine seeing the rhythms to the structures underneath and sense that we all have the same minds.¹⁰

Is there an analogous way to describe universality in the arts; stemming like language from a natural, innate source, a universal physiology, even from a shared biological necessity? This physiological effect perhaps echoes something said by Francis Bacon in an interview with John Sylvester, 'Great art is deeply ordered [...] they come out of a desire for ordering and returning fact upon the nervous system in a more violent way'.¹¹

The nervous system specifically the limbic system is the seat of the basic, innate emotions. According to biologists, this is where the sense of smell originated. In *The Art Instinct* Dutton writes a charming chapter section, which attempts to explain why there is no real art of smell. Here is my own response to this problem, not a work of smell but a work about a specific smell, a drawing of a lynx (species name *Lynx lynx*).



I fixed the drawing with what is ironically called deodorant, Lynx: Sharp Focus Body Spray (the irony, to my mind, lies in the fact that 'deodorants' add rather than remove odour, perhaps 'supraodorants' might be a better term for such products). I was intrigued by the appropriation in the brand name of something powerful, perhaps the pheromone signature of this wild animal, perhaps in a way that crudely echoes shamanic beliefs (by way of contrast the lynx was also chosen as the emblem of the *Accademei dei Lincei* Academy of the Lynxes one of the world's oldest scientific societies, its piercing vision invoked symbolically as characteristic of those dedicated to science). In art and language (though, perhaps, not in smell) there is an interplay between a) deep innate structures and mechanisms of intellectual and emotional life, and b) a vast ocean of

historically contingent cultural material. This interplay results in the styles, vocabularies, and idiosyncrasies that give both verbal expression and art their individual and cultural meanings. These emerge partly from a universal desire for sociality. Again we are back to the act of eating together, that pleasurable social ritual enacted since the campfires of the Palaeolithic era, when our mental capacities emerged in response to the pressures of existence and when storytelling (perhaps even drawing) began. But what would a universal aesthetics or theory of art, one that connects us with our evolutionary heritage, look like? Dutton writes:

What philosophy of art needs is an approach that begins by treating art as a field of activities, objects and experience that appears naturally in human life [...] naturalistic not in the sense that it is biologically driven, but because it depends on persistent cross-culturally identified patterns of behaviour and discourse: the making, experiencing and assessing of works of art. [...] From Lascaux to Bollywood, artists writers and musicians often have little trouble in achieving cross-cultural aesthetic understanding. The natural centre on which such understanding exists is where theory must begin.¹²

Characteristic features found cross-culturally in art can, according to Dutton, be reduced to a list of twelve core items, which define art in terms of cluster criteria. Some of the items single out features of works of art, others qualities of the experience of art; characteristics that might comprise a universal cross-cultural category. This is, of course, a model, but it is a model that can be appreciated for its expansiveness and inclusiveness rather than its *reductio* and exclusivity. I have had to edit this list quite brutally for the purposes of this paper but, using six, I would like to compare two works of art: Michelangelo Buonarroti's *David* and our dinner guest Marcel Duchamp's seminal readymade *Fountain*. Both objects might share a certain 'maleness' (and some similarities in terms of colour and surface lustre) but beyond that they would apparently bear little resemblance either in aesthetic appeal or cultural significance. Please note that my aim here is not to answer questions regarding the status of these objects as works of art (this might be a little too ambitious for the scope of this paper), but to posit a little food for thought in the spirit of after-dinner conversations.

1) Direct Pleasure

An art object is valued as a source of immediate pleasurable experience in itself, not for its role in producing something else that is either useful or pleasurable (i.e. it generates pleasure for its own sake). In Colour Field painting, for example, juxtapositions of pure, saturated colour can induce direct pleasure, as can the organic unity gained from layers of distinguishable pleasures experienced (either simultaneously or in close proximity to each other) in the structural form of a painterly abstraction. What direct pleasure do we derive from *David* if we exclude the erotic charge? *Fountain* has been deliberately chosen to be free from the possibility of communicating direct pleasure, unless we count the perverse pleasure of being slightly disgusted by the usual or expected function of the object?

2) Criticism

Wherever art is found, it exists alongside some form of critical language of judgement and appreciation and, given the amount of critical discourse generated by *Fountain*, here we have a clear winner. But with regard to the evolutionary response system for art hinted at earlier (and referring to Dutton's full list of twelve cluster criteria), we might need to ask where is the emotion, the individuality, the skill, and the beauty.

3) Representation

Aristotle first observed our irreducible pleasure in representation: ‘For it is the instinct of human beings from childhood to engage in mimesis [...] and equally natural that everyone enjoys mimetic objects’.¹³

In varying degrees art objects represent or imitate real or imagined experiences of the world. This is clear in the case of Michelangelo’s *David* and it is equally clear that *Fountain* does not represent anything that appears in the real world outside of ‘art’, not even in the sense of a critique of consumerism as it might be possible to perceive in Warhol’s painted Brillo boxes.



Here is my drawing *Leviathan*, a life-sized rendering of a diving sperm whale that measured ten metres in height, the same height, in human terms, as an Olympic diving board. It recently met a poignant end in Michael Landy’s *Art Bin* in the South London Gallery, an interesting ‘artworld’ response to the idea of creative failure and redundancy. More interesting to me, however, was one particular response to the drawing when it was first exhibited: one viewer said ‘Wow!’ This almost pre-lingual utterance was very rewarding for me, but it made me wonder why she would say such a thing. Was she responding to the drawing or the thing it represented? How does this relate to how Kant saw a work of art: as a presentation offered up to an imagination that appreciates it irrespective of the existence of the represented object?

4) Special Focus

Works of art are often bracketed off from everyday life – what Ellen Dissanayake calls ‘making special’.¹⁴ We might think of the plinth, the stage, the ceremony that makes an art object one of singular attention to be separated from the mundane stream of activity. Clearly the elevation of Duchamp’s urinal, from the ironmonger’s yard to the gallery, is an example of this. That *David* has

been made into an object of special focus almost goes without saying.

5) Art Traditions and Institutions

As we know, art objects in all cultures are created and to some extent given significance by their place in the history and traditions of art. Jerrold Levinson, echoing Arthur Danto, points out that works of art gain identity by the ways in which they are found in historical traditions by lines of historical precedents.¹⁵ Works of art tend to gain meaning by being produced in an 'artworld', in what are, essentially, socially constructed art institutions. Dutton argues that institutional theorists tend to apply their minds to ready-mades and conceptual art, because the interest, pleasure, or fun that we find in such works is almost exhausted by their importance in the historical situation of their production. Canonical works such as the Sistine Chapel frescos – and perhaps other 'destination works of art' such as the *Angel of the North* – gain a huge and enthusiastic audience which knows little or nothing of their institutional context. Even a small appreciation of Duchamp's *Fountain* requires a knowledge of art history or at least of the contemporary art context in which it was created.

6) Imaginative Experience

Art objects provide an imaginative experience for both producers and audiences. My drawing *Leviathan* might realistically represent a whale – at least in terms of scale – but as a drawing it very clearly becomes an imaginative object. Depending on the degree of suspension of belief, the viewer might follow the invitation to imaginatively dive down into its watery world. All art happens in a make-believe world and this applies to non-imitative abstract art as much as to the world of creative representation. Our experience of art is notably marked by the manner in which it decouples imagination from practical concerns, freeing it, as Kant instructed, from the constraints of logic and rational understanding. So what does Dutton say about *Fountain*?

Yet there it is on a plinth, an object of no special interest made into an object of the most special attention. Can this be art? Of course not, and yet it must be, as the experts continue to insist. As philosophical provocations about art, the ready-mades are intellectual masterpieces. For its part, *Fountain* may not be pretty, but as an art theoretical gesture, it is a work of incandescent genius.¹⁶

There is also a clear link between *Fountain* and a certain biological function (which reminds me, I will shortly need to ask to be excused from the table). There are other works that I could have included here: Tracy Emin's unmade ready-made *Bed* for example, a clear case of 'Eros c'est la vie' in operation, or Pier Manzoni's *Merda d'artista* from 1961 – Manzoni, with deliberation, improperly autoclaved the cans of artist's shit, letting in the anarchy of bacterial reproduction and half of the 'edition' eventually exploded.

In conclusion, my aim in this paper has been to host a discussion, of sorts, with our three guests Kant, Darwin, and Duchamp. Separated as we are from them by life and death, the true possibilities of actual social interaction are somewhat limited, but I do hope that their ideas can be connected, at least for the sake of argument, when viewed through a biological lens. As Francis Bacon remarked, 'one is always hoping that one will be able to do something nearer one's instinctive desire. I think all art is an obsession with life'.¹⁷ Finally, in a review of *The British Art Show* in *The Observer Review* on Sunday 30 October 2010 Laura Cumming asked whether any single theory could encompass all of the work on display. Perhaps Dutton's cluster theory might offer a way of drawing together these disparate, yet always animal and rational threads.

NOTES

1. See www.origin09.org.
2. Immanuel Kant (1790), *Critique of Judgement*, tr. by James Creed Meredith, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 41.
3. For example, John Gray quotes the German scientist, satirist and aphorist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg: 'That man is the noblest creature may be inferred from the fact that no other creature has contested this claim', in *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*, London: Granta 2002, p. 85.
4. Philip Hoare, *Leviathan or the Whale*, London: Fourth Estate, p. 356.
5. See Jonathan Smith, 'Evolutionary Aesthetics and Victorian Visual Culture', pp. 241–243, and Jane Munro, '“More Like a Work of Art than of Nature”: Darwin, Beauty and Sexual Selection', pp. 256–268, in Diana Donald, Jane Munro (eds), *Endless Forms: Charles Darwin, Natural Science and the Visual Arts*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.
6. R.D. Keynes (1859), *Charles Darwin's Beagle Diary*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 18.
7. Charles Darwin (1859), *On the Origin of Species*, London: John Murray, p. 413.
8. Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld', *Journal of Philosophy*; 61, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting 1964, pp. 571–584.
9. George Dickie, *Aesthetics. An Introduction*, New York: Pegasus, 1971.
10. Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct. How the Mind Creates Language*, New York: William Morrow, 1994.
David Sylvester, *Interviews With Francis Bacon 1962–1979*, London: Thames and Hudson, p. 59.
11. Dennis Dutton, *The Art Instinct*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p.51
12. Aristotle, *Poetics*, tr. by Stephen Halliwell, Cambridge. MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 3.
13. Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*; New York: Free Press, 1995.
14. Jerrold Levinson, 'Defining Art Historically', in *Music, Art and Metaphysics*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990.
15. Dutton, *The Art Instinct*, p. 201.
16. David Sylvester, *Interviews With Francis Bacon 1962-1979*, London: Thames and Hudson, p. 63.