

(Editor's note) Denis Dutton is kind enough to reply at length to [Roberto Casati's skeptical review](#) of his book, [The Art Instinct](#). The review has sparked a heated debate between Duttonites and Casatites on this blog.

Like most authors, I appreciate any thoughtful analysis of my work, and for me that includes Roberto Casati's review of my book. I won't take up all Casati's provocative points, but just a few, and not in the order he presents them.

### Intimidation

At the close of his remarks, Casati says that my "intimidating name-dropping occasionally gets tiresome - "the Iliad, the Cathedral at Chartres, Leonardo's Lady with an Ermine, Breughel's Hunters in the Snow, Hokusai's Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji" etc. The list he refers to here is in the book's introduction, where I am describing my intention in the last chapter to discuss the what I take to be Clive Bell's "cold white peaks of art," the summits of artistic achievement. The list is therefore to give the reader examples of the what I regard as greatest art in history. It does not, as Casati claims, "go on and on," but has four further items: Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Schubert's Winterreise, Van Gogh's Starry Night, and Beethoven's Sonata op. 111.

Where is the intimidation here? Most people are taught about the Iliad, or will have seen a movie based on it, will often know "Tintern Abbey," if they have studied English poetry, will have seen that Breughel painting, will know something about Chartres, and will have seen "The Wave," the most famous of all Japanese woodcuts, even if they don't know that it forms part of Hokusai's series. Yes, maybe Winterreise is a bit obscure, and a lot of people don't know the Opus 111. I'm not sure about the Leonardo choice; I was avoiding the Mona Lisa, a great painting but also, alas, a cliché. Again: that list is intended to denote examples of the highest of high art, and yet be familiar enough that most readers will recognize a couple of items on it.

Casati continues: "If I want to learn something about the arts, I need to know what is it that makes Schubert's Winterreise a masterpiece, and it is not by enlisting it along other masterpieces and adding that "their nobility and grandeur ... flow from their ability to address deep human instincts" that we'll make progress in understanding." But that is what is discussed in the last chapter, as promised in the introduction. And by the way, I stand by the phrase "nobility and grandeur." If anyone finds such notions corny, or Victorian, or embarrassing, so be it.

Intimidation? Excuse me, but that is something that art theorists, especially those of a poststructuralist stripe, have been inflicting on readers for the last forty years or more - talking down to their audiences with obscure jargon and esoteric references.

I've tried throughout to find examples and make references that I believe will be shared by a large number of my readers (Pride and Prejudice, The Simpsons, Beethoven's 9th, Jackson Pollock, a Woody Allen movie, the Bach Chaconne, Robinson Crusoe, and many other works of broad familiarity).

For his part, Casati adduces a video by the artist Jimmie Durham ("Cousine mutique des Deschiens et de Monsieur Cyclopède") as evidence that repetition can have its values in art. (I certainly agree with the point in general: the cited video was not on the web, but another Jimmie Durham work I found had a lot of repetition, too, and precious little nobility and grandeur.) Casati also mentions the movie Memento. While I didn't find Casati's examples intimidating, they did send me to Google to find out more. For myself, I want my readers to have examples from their own experience that may

support my arguments without always having to take my word on some argued conclusion or other.

Is there an art instinct?

Casati says that he can find in the book no evidence “for an art instinct: a specific, dedicated module or system modeled on the language module or instinct, that would react automatically and mandatorily in front of artworks in the way, say, in which the language system reacts when presented with linguistic stimuli.”

I have trouble regarding this as a criticism. Here is what I say in the book: "The art instinct proper is not a single genetically driven impulse similar to the liking for sweetness but a complicated ensemble of impulses – sub-instincts, we might say – that involve responses to the natural environment, to life's likely threats and opportunities, the sheer appeal of colours or sounds, social status, intellectual puzzles, extreme technical difficulty, erotic interests and even costliness.”

Various sections and chapters of the book explain how these impulses combine in the experience of art. By the way, the word “module,” by my direct intention, hardly occurs in the book. The soundness of its main theses does not depend of how arguments over mental modules are ultimately decided. The fundamental argument of the book is that a rich experience of art tends to layer various responses on top of each other in a coherent whole: the pleasure of color, skill, representation, human beauty, and emotion can operate simultaneously in the experience of a work of art.

Religion

Casati's criticism of what I say about religion is extracted from five sentences in the introduction. I remark there that religious believers naturally dislike evolutionary explanations of their religions, because religions tend to make claims about truth and morality. I'm on the side of the Darwinians, of course, but I can see why believers are made cross by writers such as Pascal Boyer and Richard Dawkins. I'm hardly intending at that point to put forward a general account of religion which anthropologists might dispute. I'm talking about Dawkins & Co. and about the negative popular reaction to them among theists. I'm simply stating that I do not expect a parallel reaction among aesthetes to an evolutionary analysis of art. This is because it is widely accepted that the arts are a realm of fiction, imagination, and make-believe. Sure, sometimes artists make truth claims and sometimes religion uses art to make truth claims (as I discuss in the last chapter). But an evolutionary explanation of the arts will not be a threat to the art establishment in the same way that an evolutionary explanation of religion is to the religious establishment. That was my only point, and I stand by it.

Art as a Cluster Concept

I also stand by the cluster definition of art and the perfectly intentional vagueness of how it applies to specific instances: the Mozart 40th Symphony, Groundhog Day, David Copperfield, Les Fleurs du Mal, Pierrot Lunaire, and my favorite episodes of Ren and Stimpy. They are all works of art, but they partake or rely on different items of the list, different aspects of art in general. Casati requests that I put the list in a hierarchy. Why? Different works and different genres exploit some items of the list more than others. Novels and landscape paintings use representation more than instrumental music, but are not for that reason superior art forms. Let readers meditate on the list and form their own hierarchies. My guess is that virtuosity and imagination will be high in most people's thinking about art. For art aficionados who are intrigued by Duchamp and the traditions of the readymade, the institutional aspect of art will loom large. Such interests and tastes are personally and historically variable.

I am not trying to dictate people's reactions to art, to tell them what they ought to enjoy. My intention is to describe and to some extent to explain, in terms of evolved preferences, the existence

of that broad range of interests in the first place. Again, with the marginal cases I discuss - fine food, World Cup football finals, and bullfighting - I am not trying to force down my readers' throats my own interpretations. (In the World Cup case I use the list to explain why I personally think the final does not qualify as art and also why someone might reasonably disagree with me.) What I want to do is make sense of these kinds of disputed cases and demonstrate how an argument might be conducted in terms of the Cluster Definition. Art works such as Duchamp's readymades are delightfully created in order to incite dispute, in fact. I also deliver a detailed analysis of Fountain and its artistic siblings in terms of my list.

## Institutional Theory

Casati says that Dada is:

"the real hard test case for Dutton's definition. Duchamp's readymades only satisfy his criterion (#11) [being recognized as art by art institutions]; which is of course a necessary condition for the Institutional Theory of art. Dada is discussed extensively later on: "...any artifact that has all, or nearly all, of the other twelve features on the list does not need to have this one to be a work of art; such an object could not fail to be a work of art in the absence of only this feature" (p. 200). This amounts to saying that the institutional feature is a non-necessary feature. In my view, this amounts to a change of subject."

There is no change of subject at all. We are talking here about the nature of art. My claim is that the arts constitute a natural category of human experience and production that existed long before art theorists. The institutional feature (#11) in my opinion is a non-necessary feature, in that there exist many cases of indisputable art that are not institutionally sanctioned, or were not at the time of their genesis. Item #11 is therefore like other items on the list. Henry Darger spent years alone in his Chicago apartment creating and expressing a fantasy world of the adventures of the Vivian girls in their fight against evil. Did he think he was creating art? Would the nearby, and conveniently named, Chicago Art Institute have considered his tracings and fictions as art? Who cares? I say that what Darger was doing was art in terms of the rest of the list, regardless of whether Darger knew it or whether it was validated by any institutional setting or decree. The same argument can be mounted with some genres and individual works of tribal art, as extensively discussed in the book.

Duchamp's readymades are not a hard case for me at all: they are easy. In chapter seven, I analyze Fountain against every item of the list and come to the conclusion that this reluctant object, despite its reluctance, can't help being a work of art. It has at least seven of the twelve features on the list, and depending how you interpret it, maybe more. I don't understand how Casati can claim that Fountain would only fall under a single item on my list, #11, the institutional criterion. Readymades are intellectually challenging (#10), they have special focus (#7), generate a critical world around themselves (#5), are objects of pleasure, (#1), and even show in their manner skill and virtuosity (#2) - in the artist's choice of the object and its presentation, anyway. Skeptics about the artistic status of readymades may disagree, but they will have to do so in terms of the Cluster Definition (which is in my view a true definition; see the work, especially by Stephen Davies, referred to on p. 249).

## Conclusion

Casati ends by saying, "I, for one, am quite happy with the idea of a mature, unconstrained art." I agree, but I'd go farther than that: I am unhappy with the idea of a constrained art. Romanticism is okay by me, and modernism is delicious. I rather like the cult of art as an ultimate expression of human freedom, which I feel I find not only in the greatest modern works, but also the most ancient art. Nevertheless, I have written a book that does indicate that our genetic natures may place limits

- not on artistic freedom, on art's power to shock, but on the receptivity of audiences. When I explain in chapter nine why I think atonality will not help any composer to attract a large audience (that, in any event, is one of the upshots of my discussion), I find it nothing to celebrate. That's just the way it is in music perception, and very likely the way it will remain. Likewise, when in chapter seven I suggest that there may be an intrinsic connection in the human mind between art and being made of rare materials, or beauty and expensiveness, it is not because I approve of this. The same can be said about what I say about the appearance of landscapes on calendars, chocolate boxes, and many a living room wall.

I'm describing the human response to art, not endorsing it. Against this evolved backdrop, modernism has a lot going in its favor, including precisely its emphasis on imagination, creativity, individuality, and rocking the boat, setting itself in opposition to boring, conventional expectations of prettiness. My message is also one of pointing out that modernism in its more rigorous forms is probably going to continue to struggle for popular acceptance. Please don't shoot the messenger.

There are further reviews and discussions of *The Art Instinct* on [the book's website](#).