

The Forger & the *Oeuvre*

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Abstract: This paper serves as an attempt to provide a less biased account of forgery as an artistic act. Rather than dealing with the forger as a negative example of what art is not, this essay endeavors to consider the social and historical aspects of the artistic field and considering how these have colored our conception of the forger, as well as what the methods and successes of the forger imply for aesthetic philosophy. While lesser forgeries deserve criticism for being inferior works of art, it seems that the main reason for their exclusion of the forged work of art is that it does not obey the rules of the artistic field which allow it to function with relative autonomy. The art world relies on a conception of the artist and artistic production as being for art only, ignoring the existence of art as a product of consumption. By getting their work accepted as part of the *oeuvre* of another artist, the forger collapses the method of value creation and, hence, the method by which art is allowed to ignore the artist's need for financial gain. If we treat the forger with charity, it can easily be seen that they are merely exiled producers of a particular sort of art, and that the distinction between a forgery and a work of art done by an artist under their actual name, while important, is less so than aesthetic philosophers would have us believe, especially with the considerations afforded to us by Post-modern artists.

To understand the margins of a field's power necessarily involves an attempt to understand the practices that are actively denied legitimate entry into the common field: rejected practices stand in such a relation to the legitimacy of the field that they must be confronted and neutralized. They undermine the authority and autonomy of the field into which they are attempting entry, seizing on gaps or contradictions as points of positive advantage. Certain fields are more apt to be troubled by such undermining of authority than others, and the art world, given its porous frontiers, is especially vulnerable to such insurgency.¹ The forger, in the case of the field of artistic production, seizes upon the gap in supply of particular artworks, producing objects which can mitigate somewhat the scarcity of artworks by individual artists. In doing so, the forger uses the very tools which the artistic field uses to enforce homogeneity within the field, turning these against the field that legitimizes and is legitimized by them. Though limited by many constraints, the forger is still in a position of great advantage: rather than attempting to create a piece within an individual style which may or may not sell, the forger produces art

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," in *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (Columbia University Press, 1993), 43.

which already has a position in the art market and within art history. In doing so, the forger shakes the faith in the art market by denying its autonomy, emphasizing external demands which the art world would rather not consider. If the art world really is just another market, there is no reason to prefer a work with heavy theoretical or art historical content painted by an individual over one lacking such content, inasmuch as both are distinguished only by their price. Similarly, if an artist does not paint in an irreproducible manner, there is no reason to prefer the original work of the artist over a copy. The forger engages in this very critique when she produces a work which is indiscernible from that done by the artist who she evokes. The intent of this paper is to follow this critique through, to see whether there is not something valuable to be found in a critical examination of the artistic principles which deny the forger legitimacy.

Forgery is generally defined in the relative terms of intent: the act of presentation of an artwork with intent to deceive buyers about the author of the work in question. However, the aesthetic philosopher wants to proceed further, to not only suggest that the forger misrepresents their work, but also that the process of knowingly creating a work with the intention of misrepresenting its authorship precludes the inclusion of the forger and their work from the artistic field in general. To the philosopher, the forger's work is a mere copying and the forger does not stand in the right relation to the artistic product for the work to be on par with an original work. This is usually couched in terms of a lack of correspondence of form to the original works and hence a lack of ability on the forger's part. Thus:

The point: anyone can achieve a particular subject or symbol; only the artists can paint it his way-and that way is revealed through formal and structural characteristics.²

This sort of criticism relies on the belief that style and form derive not only from the technique used by the artist, but from the artist and his particular psychology, as situated within a particular

² Francis V. O'Connor, "Authenticating the Attribution of Art: Connoisseurship and the Law in the Judging of Forgeries, Copies, and False Attributions," in *The Expert Versus the Object: Judging Fakes and False Attributions in the Visual Arts*, ed. Ronald D. Spencer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 8.

age. The artist-as-creator stands behind the analysis, a phantom figure upon whose consistency and unique ability this formalistic method of authentication depends.³ There is need for a purely formalistic analysis in the case of forgeries, being that the artist is often deceased, but the connoisseur suggests that, even if the work must stand alone and in relation to other works, even if there is nothing to identify the place of the work except stylistic quality, there is a whole exterior network of relations to which the painting stands that are as important as the painting itself, and these leave visible traces within the work as formal characteristics. This is necessary if one is to differentiate between seemingly similar works such as forgeries: Danto's example of identical red canvases which express vastly different ideas even though they are all visibly indistinguishable is case in point, and this position is similarly expressed by other aesthetic philosophers.⁴ Purely formal analysis can only be useful inasmuch as it points towards a determination of authenticity, and the attempt is made by connoisseurs to use formalistic analysis as a means to point towards a difference in genesis, attempting, by means of an inverse operation, to identify the hand by the form. Thus, the importance of veracity of creator is at the center of the question of forger, and it is not hard to see the major themes that define modern artistic discourse that are expressed in the critiques of forged works: the expressive aspects of work, the individual experience signified through art, the artist-as-creator. Though such an understanding of the artist is useful in analysis of specific works, the conception of the artist as an individual with a unique form or temperament is a rather recent invention and should not be spoken of as an absolute concept. Dating from the Renaissance and only reaching its central position art world after the canonization of the Impressionists and the rise of the Post-Impressionists, the individual is the result of a specific series of changes within the art field; a certain amount of digression into art history is necessary to fully grasp the field as it has stood in

³ Ibid, 9.

⁴ Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981): 1-3.
 Reuben Abel, "On 'Form' in Art," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 31, no. 3 (1972): 374.
 Colin Radford, "Fakes," *Mind*, New Series 87, no. 345 (1978): 75.

the past, to understand from whence this artistic individual came whose very self is found in the authentic piece of artwork.

It is only through a desire to find an ancient precursor to modern aesthetic thought that Ancient Greek and Roman can be said to speak of the same artist as is known today. Formerly, the artist was little more than a craftsman: to the Greeks, the painter and sculptor were those who engaged in mere craft. This status persisted with little change until the Renaissance and only through successive alteration of the artistic field and directed attempts at honor by association did the artist gain in position. The first major rise in the status of the artist coincided with the establishment of the Royal Academies of art and the detachment of artists from guilds from the 16th century onwards.⁵ The Academy aided in the creation of a theoretical basis for the arts, giving the artist access to the discursive distinction between pure and applied, a distinction borrowed from the sciences in an attempt to distance the artist from the image of artist as laborer; here is the origin of artistic disinterestedness expressed as a rejection of artistic production as an economic activity, a dichotomy which would take a more and more important position as the artistic community attempted to distance itself from its former status.⁶

Beyond differentiating the artist from the laborer, the Academy served certain needs of the artists, reinforcing the value of artists (by limiting entry into the field and increasing the value of art), increasing the value of art (by limiting output to only those artists within the field and maintaining consistency of quality), and reinforcing the autonomy of the artistic field (by maintaining a distinct set of norms and linking the artistic practice to legitimate fields, such as poetry or science).⁷ The last function was particularly important as it was directly correlated with the position of the artist and his socio-economic position. The artistic field can be broadly understood as having grown more autonomous as its social position has risen, which resulted in

⁵ Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics Part I," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 4 (1951): 522.

⁶ *Ibid*, 513-514.

⁷ *Ibid*, 515.

greater efficacy for the institution in its other roles. With greater social position and greater autonomy, a richer discourse concerning the artist and her theoretical concerns was created, further increasing the autonomy of the field and the complexity of the manner in which artistic institutions served the function of value creation, inasmuch as entry into the field required a greater grasp of technical language and art history.⁸ The increasing autonomy of the artistic field culminated in the autonomy of the artist which accompanied the emergence of the Impressionists as an independent group. In being the first group to break away successfully from the Academy, the Impressionists not only cemented the idea of the artist as misunderstood genius in the Western consciousness but also ensured that their method for value creation would play a large part in the future of art.

The Impressionist revolution is thus best interpreted as an further attempt to gain legitimacy, in this case through alternate avenues, one which resulted in a successful alteration of the landscape of the world of art which still holds sway today.⁹ The Impressionists resorted to a strategy common to all marginalized groups: overturning the hierarchy of the field while still ensuring that the principles are left intact.¹⁰ To do so, the Impressionists created their own standard of legitimacy which still obeyed the rules that had been established as necessary for the autonomy of the artistic field. Being denied entry to the Salon, new avenues of showcasing and selling art were required, resulting in the adoption of independent exhibitions in galleries and the use of dealers as intermediaries. The conflict between the belief in the inherent value of art beyond mere decorative craft and the reality of their showing paintings in a rented salesroom needed to be neutralized, as work being sold by a representative of the artist who was no more

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Market of Symbolic Goods," in *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (Columbia University Press, 1993): 113-114.

⁹ Nachoem Wijnberg and Gerda Gemser, "Adding Value to Innovation: Impressionism and the Transformation of the Selection System in Visual Arts," *Organization Science* 11, no. 3 (2000): 328.

Robert Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in fin-de-siècle Europe*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 12-20.

¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods," in *The Field of Cultural Production*, 83.

than a mere salesman would compromise the autonomy upon which their vision was based. This resulted in the reinterpretation of the exhibition and dealers: the dealer would become the “ideological” dealer, who would take on the avant-garde artists, having not just an interest in profits, but in the career arc of the artist and the beauty of the work.¹¹ The blatant financial interest of the exhibition would be morphed into the disinterested retrospective, a show which only attempted to showcase certain artists and their styles, their similarities and differences.¹² The Impressionists used the historical pedigree of style as applied to the individual artists as their alternate means of legitimacy, so that, “the retrospective could be used to align younger artists either to dead modernist masters of their elder, living contemporaries”.¹³ The importance shifted to individual painters and their works throughout history instead of schools or institutions; whereas, in the Salon, the painter was recognized in virtue of association with the school, the Impressionists made their standard the individual relation to the narrative of art history. The artist became an individual who may have worked within a tradition but whose main importance lay in their body of work as it related to itself and art history. This was reinforced in the showing works of one artist only at their exhibits, so that all works were understood relative towards one another in the arc of art history, facilitating the creation of the *oeuvre* as a standard of organization.¹⁴

The *oeuvre* is one of the most important tools to have emerged from this period and this is the point at which the forger strikes, the point which unravels the web of belief that undermines the entire artistic field. The *oeuvre* is a function of the artist, created by the artist but not necessarily controlled by her, that serves to reinforce the value of the artworks that she produces; only those products produced within the artist’s *oeuvre* are considered valuable. It serves to create a narrative, reinforcing certain beliefs about the artist, diminishing differences

¹¹ Wijnberg and Gemser, 326.

¹² Jensen, 111.

¹³ *Ibid*, 110.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 11.

between works of different time periods through the use of organizational devices such as periodization and evolution of style.¹⁵ The *oeuvre* serves not only as a method of organization but also as an indicator of economic value in a field where economic concerns are adamantly denied, allowing for value to be assigned based on a sublimated form of scarcity, the artist's name. As such, the *oeuvre* aids in ensuring the tenuous independence of the artistic field by reinforcing the values of the field and its autonomy, couching economic concerns in artistic terms, and hiding the commercial aspect inherent in the creation of a work of art intended for sale.

The *oeuvre* therefore stands as a sign of the major difference between the artists of the Salon and the artists who would dominate henceforth. By changing the model through which artists gained legitimacy, they also changed the way that art was sold; in doing so, they had to change the means by which the artistic field maintained its autonomy. The reality of external demands in a field which was now decentralized resulted in the creation of certain artistic tropes which could be used to reinforce the autonomy of the artist: the myth of the artist who only produces for herself and the disavowal of the external demands of the market were results of this.¹⁶ In the post-Impressionist art world, the only means by which one can gain legitimacy and, therefore, profits is through artistic recognition, by becoming a canonized "name".¹⁷ Having a name ensures a state of scarcity and, therefore, a rise in the price of artworks. Though the majority of artists believe that money does not have place in art, the rules of the art world and the socio-economic realities which must confront each artist serve to ensure that money is an issue which cannot be directly addressed but which also stands as an important concern. There are few easy and respectable ways to make a profit off of one's artworks, and only the most financially

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972): 21-24.

¹⁶ Bourdieu, "Field of Cultural Production", 50-60.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 37-40.

secure can accept the lack of profit that goes along with being a member of the art world.¹⁸

Because few artists have the ability to persist in the artistic field without recourse to other modes of income, few are able to observe the rules of the art world in their pure form and most take up careers on the margins of the artistic field. Auxiliary careers are many, from the important critic to the elementary school art instructor, and these serve either as temporary refuges or permanent locations lying at the margins of the art world.¹⁹ There are few means to raise one's position, creating a lack of opportunity for advancement of position and a sense of dissatisfaction which is compounded by a lack of stable income. The forger's activities thus serve as a critique upon the field which has excluded them: she has not succeeded in the bad-faith economy of the art world, has come to understand that the work of art has only as much value as the name attached to it and has come to terms with the economic interests that permeate the artistic field. This knowledge, coupled with an understanding of the principles by which the artistic field operates, allows the forger to be in a position to act and to have their actions count. The reason that the forger is so maligned is precisely because the forger understands styles, techniques, sales procedures, methods for authentication, critical interpretations; she has encountered all of these aspects of the art world in her marginal position and has come to know their strengths and weaknesses. The forger knows where to strike because she knows the topography of the field, the methods of entry and authentication, the regions of power and the canonical works.

This is to be contrasted with the legitimate artist producing original works: even if she knows exactly what she wishes to paint, she cannot be sure of anything beyond the actuality of her work. She cannot be sure that her art will sell, nor that what she considers important in her work will be what is considered important to others. Only time and the influence of powerful individuals or groups can determine which works are held to be more important than others, or even if she is considered important. She must create original works which obey the rules of the

¹⁸ Ibid, 43.

¹⁹ Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982): 96-99.

art world but also keep an eye for what is on the cutting edge, as trends in the art world are often short lived. The forger's target is far more stable: there is already an *oeuvre* with a history which is widely accepted, and forger can read the critical theory concerning it, studying the apparent congruencies between works by certain artists in specific periods. Only certain painters are valuable and these painters have a history, an *oeuvre*, a biography. All the skills and knowledge which had earlier lain dormant are put to use as these tools for organization and education are used serve the forger's needs and ensure that the forger is in a position in which he or she can benefit.

It is illustrative to look at an example of a forger who engaged the art world in just this way. The revival of interest in Vermeer's work during Hans van Meegeren's life had resulted in increased prices and new research regarding the painter's *oeuvre*. Scholars were especially interested in Vermeer's stylistically different early work, which did not fit comfortably in his *oeuvre*, being uncharacteristic of the painter in size and subject, as well as being uncharacteristically influenced by certain Italian painters.²⁰ Such an anomaly in the *oeuvre* resulted in the positing by certain critics, such as Abraham Bredius, of certain influences and biographical details, which would remain to be proven with the discovery of more Vermeers from this period. Van Meegeren was able to tailor his approach so that his results corresponded to this theory and served to regularize the *oeuvre* of Vermeer by creating such a position which would serve to reinforce the currently held beliefs about Vermeer and his influences. With the canonization of his *The Supper at Emmaus* as a genuine Vermeer, van Meegeren took advantage of a new position within the *oeuvre* to create a place for his later forgeries, allowing him to produce more artworks from this period.

It will be asked: if the acceptance of a fake is likelier to allow for the acceptance of others, can't this also imply that the forger does not actually capture the entirety of style, at least

²⁰ Hope B. Werness, "Hans van Meegeren Fecit," in *The Forger's Art*, ed. Denis Dutton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 24.

inasmuch as what occurs is not coherence of style at all, but a pollution of style, which makes it likelier that further pollutions will be accepted? Connoisseurs certainly tend to believe that it is likely impossible that a forger could actually accurately copy another's style. The artist, Danto believes, expresses art history and theories which have been accepted and internalized by the artist, and stand as an expression to the artist's reaction to the art world and its history.²¹ The forger cannot capture this natural reaction in a way that the artist can, and an attempt to do so would be obvious. The theoretical underpinnings of the artist's work serve to preclude certain methods of interpretation, and the forger's work would therefore not be the same as an original.²² While his point is well taken, it underestimates the artist's ability to cultivate a style. To react to art history does not necessarily mean to act unthinkingly, and there is a certain cultivation of style which the artist must engage in if the work is to be recognized as part of an *oeuvre*. The artist must keep their recognizable style while also attempting to change certain aspects of their work and, in doing so, to create a narrative arc. A forger need not be completely accurate, and it is in fact a weakness to copy the style of an artist slavishly. The famous forger Elmyr De Hory described the problem as such: "[Y]ou want to be aware that styles and techniques changed for each artist with time-they were always experimenting with new or old methods."²³ Artistic recurrence of elements lies on a spectrum, with pastiche or self-plagiarisation at the extreme end of recurrence and indiscernability of style and technical incompetence in the case of complete lack of recurrence. The forger does not and does not need to paint in the exact same manner as the original artist; she must only ensure that the work follows the rules which characterize the artist's original work. In doing so the forger *can* produce indiscernible works, inasmuch as the works express principles and techniques which characterize the artist's original work, obeying

²¹ Danto, *Transfiguration*, 51.

²² *Ibid*, 98-99.

²³ Clifford Irving, *Fake: The Story of Elmyr De Hory, the Greatest Forger of Our Time*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), 142.

certain rules of repetition and spatial arrangement, certain rules of paint use, etc. The forger need not know how the painter achieved her effect but only how such an effect can be replicated.

It seems that, rather than the forger having difficulty in copying the artist's style, the connoisseur has difficulty in explaining why the forger cannot actually copy the style of another artist, with special considerations of cases in where it is clear that there is immense stylistic similarity. Francis O'Connor, commenting on the similarity of the paintings produced during a production of a play about Pollock to original works suggests that there is the possibility of some sort of psychological identification with the original artist in the case of an indiscernible work.²⁴ This sort of explanation has too magical a slant to be taken seriously, but the connoisseur must either have recourse to such an explanation or invent differences which may not have been considered important in prior interpretation. The selectivity of formal analysis is exposed in such cases: a value must ultimately be placed on certain elements of a work for it to be analyzed as part of a set of artworks. If two paintings obey the same rules of value relative to those which demarcate the field of an *oeuvre*, then other rules must be invented to account for a difference between the works, lest they be considered nearly identical. The inherent weakness of the formalist view is thus exposed as a relatively arbitrary manner of interpretation.

The *oeuvre* seems indispensable if coherence is to be granted to the judgment of artistic works, and so it must be asked how important the individual artist is relative to its coherence. Certainly, as a historical or social product, such a genesis is important, and there must be some kind of origin for there to be an *oeuvre*; this does not imply, however, that an individual artist must exist or that the piece need be from the actual period in which it is placed. It is illuminating to observe the example of Corot: it is said that Corot often could not tell the difference between his paintings and those of others who he painted with, influenced, and was influenced by. He would often collaborate with other painters, others finishing his work and he working on the

²⁴ O'Connor, "Authenticating the Attribution of Art," 19.

paintings of others.²⁵ These paintings were painted in the presence of the painters to whom they were attributed, but the question remains whether attribution to an individual (and to which one) is proper and what place such works would occupy within an *oeuvre*. Corot didn't seem to care whether it was he or others who painted the work, as long as it was his idea and in his style.²⁶ Such a notion of style and attribution stands in great contrast to that which only focuses on the individual who created the work and their specific attributes. Only in an artificial framework is such consistency created: the *oeuvre* works because it is an intellectual, rather than an artistic activity.

A rethinking of the *oeuvre* is especially necessary due to the inadequacy of the individualistic model in dealing with conceptual artists such as Damien Hirst, who has mass produced pictures and paintings, as well as preserved animals and cigarette butts. It is notable that he allows those working for him to direct themselves in their work: his role is only as instigator and authenticator of the work, signing each work and approving the final product.²⁷ Under a strictly individualistic expressive model, the model preferred under the current conception of the artist and the *oeuvre*, these works of art would hardly be an example of style or form, except in the loosest sense. It might be said that the style of the concepts or the methods used (recurrence of preserved animals, for example) would be a characteristic, but it seems very questionable to suggest that there is something of him in each work under the way in which it is conceived in the expressive model. Cases such as his demand that we shift attention from the artist and her biography to the network which creates the artist and allows the artist to subsist. The *oeuvre* is a tool, a method of organization, resulting from certain historical, social, and economic realities, and it must be reconstructed if it is to be more than mere psychological projection. The artist's name identifies not a mere individual, but also a method of interpretation

²⁵ Vincent Pomarède, "Corot Forgeries: Is the Artist Responsible?" in *Corot* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996), 386.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 391.

²⁷ "The Shark's Last Move," *The Economist*, 13 September 2008, 91.

of a specific set of works.²⁸ Certain aspects of the artist's biography are considered more important than others, and those which correspond most often to the tropes which define the artist are expounded in the hagiographies produced for consumption of artists. The misunderstood artist is such an individual who emerges out of the active selection of biographical information. Such considerations are at work when artist self-consciously creates an image for themselves such as Whistler or Egon Schiele did.²⁹ These two artists, and many others, made their lives an integral part of their work, reinforcing the expressive tendency of interpretation and ensuring the unity of their respective *oeuvres*. They knew, more or less, that the artist only a sign for interpretation and that the analysis of the artist's biography to the *oeuvre* is only the performance of an organizational function, one which serves to rationalize a distinct grouping of individual works and make them into a whole.³⁰

These considerations suggest that the *oeuvre* need not necessarily be based on reality, whether the reality of aspects of a life or that of an individual figure. Our understanding of the *oeuvre* should be adapted to reflect this, to reveal the very tenuous identification of the individual with the artist. The *oeuvre* is necessary inasmuch as it serves to sublimate the need for creating value in art and is indispensable if there is to be meaningful talk about art, but cannot fully remove certain forgeries completely from the canon of the artists who were emulated: *Prometheus Bound* and *Rhesus* are still included within the canons of Aeschylus and Euripides, respectively, even though both are widely acknowledged to be the work of other's hands. While the forger is not the same artist who created the original works which bear the famous name, there is a place for the works of the forger, and it seems that there should be another avenue, other than the fog of time, which can result in some form of canonization for the forger's works. By altering our conception of the *oeuvre*, we pay respect to the forger's work, while also

²⁸ Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979): 146-147.

²⁹ Jensen, *Marketing Modernism*, 10.

³⁰ Foucault, "What is an Author," 150-151.

acknowledging its relation to the original artist's works. Such reconsideration seems inevitable, especially considering the emergence of artwork directly influenced by mass production and commercialization which is also difficult to interpret within the expressive framework. There is undoubtedly a form to be found in every mass produced work, just as there is a form to be found in every artwork; that the interpretation of this form should not be arbitrary is important for the maintenance of the artistic field. The *oeuvre* is only a problem inasmuch as it remains a static notion. By altering it to accommodate the forger's works, we also make it capable of dealing with many of the Post-Modern works which cannot be easily understood through other methods. If the forger does not elicit the sympathy of the aesthetic philosopher, the current avant-garde should be enough to suggest that such a reinterpretation of the *oeuvre* is necessary.

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