

In Defense of Art Museum Audio Guides

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Abstract: This paper aims to defend the value of art museum audio guides. Modern guides have many functions, but I will focus on two that pertain directly to art appreciation. First, audio guides offer tours that direct visitors' attention to museum highlights. Second, they have individual stops that offer commentary and criticism about individual works of art. I will concede that the tours do not serve the interests of all visitors. However, I will defend the merits of the individual stops. In particular, I will argue that they provide information about the associated works that it would be difficult for us to learn just by looking at them for ourselves. In so doing, the guides put us in a better position to appreciate the works. Crucially, this benefit obtains even if art appreciation turns out to be subjective, must be undertaken autonomously, or has to be grounded in empirical observation.

Keywords: audio guides, art museums, aesthetic value, aesthetic appreciation, aesthetic experts

The aim of this paper is to defend the value of art museum audio guides. Modern guides have an ever-expanding list of functions. Some include wayfinding capabilities, games for children, social media connectivity, and immersive audio triggered by near-field technology. However, I will restrict my focus to two functions that pertain directly to art appreciation. First, audio guides offer tours that direct visitors' attention to the museum highlights. Second, they have individual stops that provide commentary and criticism about the works of art on display.

I will concede that audio guide tours do not serve the interests of all museum visitors. In particular, they unduly constrain the experience of people whose personal taste in art would take them off the beaten path. However, I will defend the value of the individual stops. I will argue that the instruction they provide often puts visitors in a position to make better aesthetic judgments and experience greater aesthetic enjoyment than they otherwise would.

The pro-audio guide position might sound intuitive: the more we know about a work of art, the more we will get out of it. Yet, uptake rates for audio guides are low. According to some studies, less than five percent of visitors get them.¹ Some of this reluctance has to do with practical considerations.² Visitors say they lack the necessary time, would rather chat with other members of their group, or find the technology confusing. I do not wish to downplay these practical concerns, but I will set them aside for the purposes of this paper.

Instead, I intend to address the theoretical dimension to audio guide resistance.³ Over the course of the paper, I will explain how reliance on audio guides is subject to a series of potent philosophical challenges. To foreshadow, objections will come from skeptics about aesthetic testimony. In addition, they will come from advocates of aesthetic autonomy or independence. Finally, they will come from proponents of aesthetic subjectivism, aesthetic immediacy, and aesthetic empiricism.

My goal is to defuse these philosophical challenges. Yet, I will not do so by showing that the positions underlying them are false. I will not argue, for example, that skepticism about aesthetic testimony is misplaced or that emphasizing autonomy with regard to aesthetic judgments is wrongheaded. In addition, I will not attempt to disprove the view that aesthetic appreciation is subjective or must be grounded in empirical observation. Instead, I will take an indirect approach to my goal. I will argue that even if all these positions are true, audio guides still provide valuable assistance when it comes to art appreciation. To begin, however, I will provide a brief overview of the history and functions of art museum audio guides.

1 The History and Functions of Art Museum Audio Guides

Art museums have long offered visitors some sort of expert guidance.⁴ Object labels, for example, existed in some of the first museums.⁵ Usually taking the form of a small placard posted on a nearby wall, an object label supplies basic facts about the associated work. It relates the work's title, the name of the artist, the date of composition, and other details, such as the methods and materials used. Beneath this information, some object labels include a few lines of commentary to help with interpretation.

Another example is live tours by museum staff, which also have a long history. Live tours serve two purposes. First, they direct visitors' attention to the museum highlights. Some museums are enormous, and it is easy for visitors to get overwhelmed by the amount of artwork on display. With limited time, they will not be able to view all of it. They will have to be selective in their approach. If the visitors are unacquainted with the museum's holdings, however, they may not know where to begin. Live tours help here. Rather than leading visitors past every work, they focus on a few that are especially worthwhile.

Second, live tours make these select works more accessible.⁶ They help visitors appreciate what is valuable about them and why. To this end, tour guides engage in what Noël Carroll identifies as the standard acts of art criticism.⁷ For example, they may point out salient formal features of a given work or place it in a particular category or genre. They may also explain the work's historical context or give an account of its provenance. In addition, the tour guides may offer an interpretation of the meaning or purpose of the work. Finally, they may analyze how the aspects of the work serve this meaning or purpose.

Audio guides grew out of this tradition of live tours.⁸ In fact, the earliest guides were just pre-recorded versions of such tours. These recordings were broadcast over shortwave radio, and visitors

picked up the broadcasts with portable receivers. This technology, developed by Willem Sandberg in the 1950s, had a drawback. As with traditional live tours, everyone heard the same thing at the same time.⁹ This resulted in large groups of people moving from work to work in a pack. Visitors could not go at their own pace or skip works that failed to interest them.

Museums experimented with various ways of addressing this challenge. The first breakthrough came with the advent of portable cassette tape players in the 1970s.¹⁰ All of a sudden, visitors had control. They could start and stop tours as they saw fit or fast forward past parts that bored them. The appearance of digital devices in the 1990s opened up more possibilities.¹¹ Digital devices allowed for random access. Patrons could punch in a number associated with a particular object and call up information about it whenever they wanted. They no longer had to follow fixed tours with pre-determined stops. They could wander through the museum at their leisure, learning more about the works that interested them.

To summarize, art museum audio guides have two main functions. They direct attention to the museum highlights, and they make individual works more accessible. With the dawn of digital devices, these functions have become severable. Visitors can follow the tours if they please. But they can also forgo the tours and hear commentary about just those works that strike their fancy.

2 On Trusting the Experts

We can begin our assessment of audio guides by focusing on the tours that bring visitors past the museum highlights. The value of these tours depends on the expertise of the people who developed them. But can we count on these curators and critics to have good taste? Can we rely on them to pick out the works that will afford us the best museum experience?

Jerrold Levinson argues that we can.¹² He develops his argument as part of a defense of Hume's "ideal critics" or "true judges," but we can adapt it for our present purposes. First, the developers of audio guides have in-depth knowledge of art history, theory, and practice. They also have first-hand experience with a wide range of works. This includes masterpieces that have passed the test of time as well as ones of lesser value. Their background and training have enabled them to refine their aesthetic sensitivities and discriminatory capacities. It has put them in a position to tell better works from worse ones. Thus, we can count on them to know which pieces in the museum are most likely to give rise to the greatest enjoyment for the greatest number of people. They are our best "truffle pigs" for aesthetic value.¹³

Levinson's argument has come in for criticism on several fronts.¹⁴ But an objection developed by Nick Riggle (based on an idea first raised by Levinson himself) is particularly apropos.¹⁵ Riggle worries that we may often be better off ignoring the critics *even if they are right*. That is, even if they do recommend the best works—the ones most likely to give most people the deepest and richest aesthetic experience—we may often have a good reason not to follow their advice. For we are not always personally interested in the best works. Our preference is often for works we recognize to be lesser. Indeed, we sometimes love works we know might be bad from the point of view of the ideal

critics. Moreover, these aesthetic loves can be integral to our personal identity. They can be part and parcel of who we see ourselves as being.

According to Riggle, it is good for us to cultivate our own aesthetic personality. But we may fail to do so if we attend only to the works recommended by the critics. In part, this is because we may no longer devote time to the works we love. But, in part, it is because attending to the works endorsed by the critics may reshape us. It may change our aesthetic preferences and sensitivities so that we become more like the critics and less like ourselves. Indeed, if we align ourselves with the critics, we may become disinterested, as the critics are supposed to be. We may end up devoid of all personal aesthetic attachments whatsoever.

Alvin Goldman and Stephanie Ross claim we can solve this problem by finding a critic whose taste we share.¹⁶ But this option is not open to us in the case of art museum audio guides. It is true that some museums offer different tours for people with different interests.¹⁷ In addition, outsiders have developed alternative guides to some exhibits.¹⁸ But such things are rare. Plus, even when they are available, they cannot account for everyone's taste. There are simply too many visitors with too many perspectives to accommodate.

There are other potential ways to rebut the objection at hand.¹⁹ But let us suppose all the rebuttals fail. It follows that the traditional tours offered by audio guides will not always serve us well. However, the guides can still be useful even if the tours are not. For the random access capabilities of modern guides allows visitors to eschew the tours. Visitors can look up information about just those works that interest them. They can wander the galleries at their leisure, and when a particular piece speaks to them, they can punch in the stop number associated with it and learn more about it. This is the approach to audio guides I will defend in the remainder of the paper.

3 The Problem of Aesthetic Testimony

The purpose of an individual audio guide stop is to make the associated artwork more accessible. One way it achieves this purpose is by providing context for the work. For instance, a stop may identify the genre to which the work belongs or locate its place in art history. It may also describe the work's cultural significance, trace its provenance, and so forth.

Some audio guide stops go beyond this "contextualizing" activity. They call attention to the work's salient formal properties or offer an interpretation of its symbolic meaning. Some stops also identify the point or purpose of the work and analyze whether its parts are adequate to this purpose. Finally, although this is becoming rare for reasons I will discuss, some stops relate an expert's judgment of the overall merits of the associated work.

Like audio guide tours, individual audio guide stops face philosophical problems. One of them is the much-discussed problem of aesthetic testimony.²⁰ The domain of aesthetics is sometimes said to be different from other domains in that it is impermissible to base our beliefs on another person's authority here. We can learn, for instance, that the White House is located at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue by listening to someone tell us that this is so. But we cannot learn that the *Mona Lisa* is

beautiful in the same way. Testimony provides an adequate justification for belief in the former but not the latter case.

There are disagreements about the scope of the rule against aesthetic testimony.²¹ But it is usually taken to cover testimony about evaluative aesthetic properties, such as beauty and ugliness.²² Audio guides discuss such things. Of course, they talk about other matters too. And at least some of the knowledge they seek to impart would not be forbidden by even the strongest version of the rule. I know of no author who defends the view that we cannot learn basic historical facts about an artwork via testimony, such as who created it and when. Still, the rule against aesthetic testimony appears to cover at least some of what audio guides address. Hence, further scrutiny is required.

4 The Principles of Autonomy and Acquaintance

Some philosophers ground the rule against aesthetic testimony in *the principle of acquaintance*. This principle states that our judgment of an aesthetic object must proceed from our direct experience of that object.²³ In other words, our determination that an object has or lacks a given aesthetic property must be rooted in an eye-witness encounter.²⁴

The principle of acquaintance is controversial. Yet, let us suppose for the sake of argument that it is acceptable. It does not appear to be violated by people who listen to audio guides while perusing the galleries at an art museum. Such people are trying to appreciate objects that stand directly before them. Thus, they are typically not forming judgments solely on the basis of the experts' say so. Instead, they are typically relying on expert input in tandem with their own personal experience.

The prohibition against aesthetic testimony is also sometimes based on the *principle of autonomy*. In brief, it states that we must come to our aesthetic conclusions through our own efforts.²⁵ At first pass, this principle also does not seem to rule out learning from audio guides. The reason is that such learning typically does not constitute cases of "pure testimony."²⁶ The experts speaking on the audio guides seldom simply assert judgments about the artworks and demand that listeners believe these judgments on their say-so. Rather, to the degree they offer judgments at all, they provide reasons for them. Like good critics, they offer supporting evidence and arguments for their considered opinions.

In sum, audio guide listeners are not being asked to accept judgments about the aesthetic properties of artworks simply on the authority of some expert. Instead, they are being invited to follow a chain of reasoning laid out by the expert. Following this chain of reasoning requires listeners to use their own cognitive machinery. They have to engage their own minds to see that the experts' inferences hold. Moreover, since the guides often instruct listeners to look at specific physical properties of the works in order to support their judgments, the listeners have to utilize their own perceptual faculties as well. Thus, if the listeners end up accepting the conclusions forwarded by the guides, it is through their own efforts to grasp the grounds for these conclusions.

4.1 An Augmented Version of the Autonomy Principle

Thi Nguyen proposes an augmented version of the autonomy principle. He interprets it as requiring more than just that we rely on our own faculties. It also demands that we make our own connections, come up with our own interpretations, detect our own affective resonances, and so forth.²⁷

Why accept this version of the principle? Nguyen responds by claiming that aesthetic appreciation is a form of “striving play.”²⁸ The joy of such play does not lie in victory but rather in the struggle for victory. So too, the value of aesthetic appreciation does not come from attaining the right result, i.e. the correct interpretation or judgment of the work. Instead, it comes from the struggle to attain the right result. Accordingly, we miss out on the value of aesthetic appreciation if we just passively follow the advice or instruction of others.

Nguyen’s augmented autonomy principle might appear to threaten the use of audio guides. Indeed, one of Nguyen’s stock examples of violating the principle is a person who mindlessly listens to audio guides while visiting an art museum.²⁹ Yet, one need not listen to audio guides in a passive or mindless manner. It is possible, as Nguyen himself observes, to use them as a springboard for one’s own reflections rather than a terminus for one’s thinking.³⁰ Indeed, the structure of most modern audio guides encourages the kind of use Nguyen has in mind here. In their early days, audio guides veered towards the didactic.³¹ They issued authoritative declarations about which views listeners should adopt regarding the works of art on display. But this style has largely been abandoned.³² In recent years, audio guides have tended to embrace a more suggestive approach. They have striven to put listeners in a position to make their own aesthetic judgments rather than telling them what judgments to make. In many cases, this has involved offering competing perspectives on the work at hand and leaving it up to the listener to decide which one is best.

5 The Problem of Aesthetic Empiricism

Unfortunately, the features of audio guides that enable them to avoid the problem of aesthetic testimony give rise to further problems. In the next two sections, I will canvas a few of them. To begin, recall that museum visitors typically listen to the guides in the presence of the associated artworks. This fact allows visitors to fulfill the requirements of the acquaintance principle when making aesthetic judgments. But it also raises the question of whether the guides are irrelevant or redundant. If museum visitors are interested in a particular work, they can consult it directly. They do not have to rely on what the guides might say because they have immediate access to the work itself. So, why is it important for them to listen to the guides?

Whether this question gains traction with us depends on our art axiology. That is, it hinges on which values we consider relevant to art appreciation. Some philosophers endorse a broad view here.³³ They maintain that a work’s moral, social, political, and historical value can affect its artistic value. As such, we must take these values into account when engaging in art appreciation. The benefit of audio guides is obvious on this broad art axiology. For a work’s historical value, etc., often depends on considerations we cannot learn just by directly perceiving the work. Without outside

input, such as from an audio guide, we would miss them. As a result, our judgment of the work's artistic value would be impoverished.

Take the fact that Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) revolutionized art history. We cannot discover this fact just by looking at Duchamp's sculpture. *Fountain's* importance to art history depends on its relationship to the works that came before it and after it. These relationships are not physically embedded in the work itself. They are not among the properties manifest to our senses when we are looking at the work. So, if we want to learn about the historical importance of *Fountain*, we must turn to an outside source, such as an audio guide.³⁴

Matters look differently on a narrow art axiology. Some philosophers say that the only values relevant to art appreciation are aesthetic values.³⁵ All the rest—historical values and so forth—have to do with other kinds of appreciation. These other kinds of appreciation have their place, of course. But they are not on the agenda of the museum visitor who wishes to appreciate art qua art.

How does this narrow art axiology create a problem for audio guides? Well, on one interpretation, what makes a property "aesthetic" is that it is evident or manifest to our physical senses.³⁶ Either it is a property we can detect in an immediate perceptual encounter with the underlying object, or it entirely depends on such properties. In other words, what is aesthetically valuable about an object is what we can appreciate merely by looking at it or listening to it.³⁷

This position, often called "aesthetic empiricism," gives rise to an apparent dilemma for audio guides. Either the guides talk about the aesthetic properties of the artwork, or they do not. If they do, then they threaten to become redundant. For, as noted, visitors listening to the guides are typically standing directly before the associated works. Thus, the works' aesthetic properties are right there for the seeing or hearing. And since visitors can consult these properties for themselves, they do not need the guides.

On the other hand, if the guides do not talk about the aesthetic properties of the artwork, then they threaten to become irrelevant. For it does not seem like we need to know about the non-aesthetic properties of a work, such as its history or provenance, to detect or enjoy its aesthetic properties.³⁸ At least not if, per empiricism, we restrict aesthetic properties to those that are manifest to our physical senses. One can see the beautiful colors of Claude Monet's water lily paintings, for example, without knowing who Monet was, when he lived, or why he painted what he did.

6 The Problems of Aesthetic Immediacy and Aesthetic Subjectivity

It is possible to arrive at a similar anti-audio guide conclusion from another angle. Recall that audio guides seldom engage in pure testimony. They rarely just assert conclusions about the aesthetic value of a work and then ask visitors to believe those conclusions on the basis of their authority. Instead, audio guides offer reasons and justifications for the conclusions they put forward. This approach enables listeners to adhere to the principle of autonomy. Yet, it raises another set of concerns. For there are well-known challenges to the legitimacy of aesthetic reasoning. In *On Criticism*, Noël Carroll mentions two challenges in particular that deserve our attention.³⁹

First, it is sometimes said that aesthetic judgments are not the product of reason or reflection. They are instead the product of immediate intuition.⁴⁰ In other words, that an object is beautiful is not a conclusion we arrive at by way of applying general rules or critical principles.⁴¹ It is just something we see. We perceive that an object is beautiful in the same way we perceive that it is blue or red.

If this view is correct, then the aesthetic reasoning provided by audio guides will not be helpful. For it will not be able to ground the aesthetic judgments of museum visitors. Moreover, it may end up disrupting the visitors' appreciation of the artwork. By stimulating the visitors' reflective mental processes, it may yank them out of their immediate ones. This is partly why Kant said he would stop up his ears if a critic tried to prove to him with rules and principles that some poem or play is beautiful.⁴² Insofar as audio guides are trying to do something similar, Kant would refuse to listen to them as well.

Second, it is sometimes said that aesthetic judgments are a matter of taste. And it is sometimes added that, like gustatory taste, aesthetic taste is subjective.⁴³ According to this view, when we say something is beautiful, we are not identifying a real property that the object has. Nor are we making a claim about the object that might in principle be justified by appealing to such real properties. Instead, we are reporting our inner feelings. We are saying that we like the object or that perceiving it brings us pleasure. Of course, we often try to provide justifications for our feelings about the aesthetic value of objects. But if aesthetic taste is subjective, these justifications amount to nothing more than rationalizations. They do not establish that our feelings are right or true because there is no such thing as right or true feelings in the aesthetic domain.

If we assume that aesthetic judgments are subjective, then, just as under the assumption that they are immediate, it appears to follow that the aesthetic reasoning provided by audio guides is unhelpful. Since this reasoning does not justify any judgments that the guides might put forward, it does not oblige listeners to share those judgments. In other words, the aesthetic reasoning provided by the audio guides lacks normative force. Moreover, it threatens to be distracting. Listening to an expert rationalize his or her feelings may get in the way of visitors' ability to enjoy theirs.

7 Theory versus Practice

There is a tempting way forward here. We could try to save audio guides by attacking the theories that underpin the objections described in the previous two sections. We could object to narrow art axiology, for example. Like Andrew Huddleston, we could argue that artistic value extends beyond aesthetic value.⁴⁴ It includes originality, morality, and other factors that rely on a work's non-manifest properties. We could also, like David Davies, reject empiricist approaches to aesthetic value.⁴⁵ We could maintain that grasping aesthetic properties often depends on possessing background knowledge. Finally, like Carroll, we could push back against the idea that aesthetic judgment is subjective or immediate in nature.⁴⁶

This defense strategy will not work, however. For the objections to audio guides described in the previous two sections do not depend on the truth of the theories just mentioned. Nor do they

depend on people's believing these theories. They only depend on people's acting in accordance with the theories when visiting art museums. For example, someone might think that in theory artistic value goes beyond aesthetic value. But in practice they might only like to enjoy aesthetic values. So too someone might agree that grasping certain aesthetic values requires background knowledge. Or they might accept that on the deepest level aesthetic appreciation involves reflection. Yet, on any given museum visit, they might not feel like attending to every aesthetic value. They might not wish to engage in the deepest form of aesthetic appreciation. They might prefer to pursue an immediate enjoyment of the sensory properties of the artwork. Alternatively, they might prefer a subjective approach. In sum, one may be a contextualist in the classroom but an empiricist at Tate Modern. One may be an objectivist while reading the *British Journal of Aesthetics* but a subjectivist while visiting Dia: Beacon.

Such inconsistency is not necessarily irrational. Recall Riggle's view from earlier. He states that we have an interest in developing a personal aesthetic style. He adds that our personal style may diverge from what is ideal from an objective point of view. Riggle is concerned with justifying our decision to focus on "lesser" works. But his point can be extended to cover how we approach these works. For example, our personal style might involve restricting our attention to aesthetic properties. It might also involve delighting in the subjective pleasure that this focus affords us. We might acknowledge that we are not engaging in the ideal form of art appreciation. We might admit that Hume's "true judges" would proceed differently. But insofar as we are justified in developing a personal style, our approach will be defensible.

An effective defense of audio guides must accommodate this point. It must carve out a place for the guides under the assumption that museum visitors often justifiably operate with a narrow art axiology or a narrow conception of art appreciation. It must establish that visitors have a reason to listen to audio guides even if they merely want to enjoy a limited range of aesthetic values in a subjective or immediate fashion. Thus, that is what I intend to do in the rest of the paper.

8 Appreciating Context-Sensitive Properties

Rather than taking on all the problems facing audio guides at once, I would like to proceed strategically. I will begin by setting aside the problem posed by aesthetic empiricism. It creates some unique difficulties that I will wait to address until section 10. Instead, I will start by focusing on the problems posed by aesthetic subjectivity and aesthetic immediacy.

Suppose that on a particular museum visit we only wish to appreciate the aesthetic properties of the works on display. In addition, suppose we only wish to enjoy them in a subjective or immediate fashion. It remains the case that we must apprehend these properties in order to enjoy them. And some aesthetic properties cannot be apprehended without prior knowledge or reflection.

James Shelley puts the point as follows.⁴⁷ We must distinguish between grasping something preparatory to appreciating it and appreciating it once grasped. Reflection and background knowledge can be necessary for the former even if they are not for the latter. Thus, even if we are

only interested in subjective or immediate forms of aesthetic appreciation, reflection and background knowledge may still be required to put ourselves in a position to engage in these forms of appreciation. Insofar as this is the case, audio guides may prove helpful.

To develop Shelley's point, note that some aesthetic properties are context-sensitive. Whether a work has them or lacks them depends on the context in which it is situated.⁴⁸ Being exciting is like this. Whether a work excites us depends in part on what we expect from it and what we are comparing it to. It might produce excitement in us, for example, only if we consider it in light of other members of its genre or other works by the same artist. Of course, a good curator might position some of the relevant works nearby. That way, visitors can acquire knowledge of them first-hand.⁴⁹ But this is not always possible. Museums do not always possess the requisite works in their collections. Audio guides can help in these cases. They can provide visitors with the contextual information they need to be in a position to find the work exciting.

Dominic Lopes develops a version of the foregoing argument by appealing to Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942–1943).⁵⁰ This painting, like many done by Mondrian, belongs to the De Stijl genre. De Stijl is characterized by minimalism. It pares works down to their basic visual elements—straight lines and black, white, or primary colors—which are composed on a black grid. *Broadway Boogie Woogie* is unusual in this regard. Its grid is not black but yellow. Indeed, black does not appear in the painting. Instead, the thin yellow bands that compose the grid run vertically and horizontally at irregular intervals across a light grey background. These bands are intermittently interrupted by blips of darker grey as well as blue and red. In addition, there are none of the large blocks of color that appear in most De Stijl works. Rather, we find about twenty smallish rectangles of blue, red, and yellow hemmed in by this or that intersection on the grid. The visual appearance reminds one of the blinking lights of the city as well as the syncopated beat of jazz. Hence the painting's name.

Compared with other members of the De Stijl genre, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* "buzzes energetically."⁵¹ This effect disappears, however, when the work is compared with members of other genres. Compared with Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, it seems staid. Compared with William Turner's proto-impressionist harbor scenes, it seems lifeless. And compared with Salvador Dali's surrealism, it seems unimaginative. Thus, if we know nothing about De Stijl—if we are unfamiliar with its conventions and paradigms—we will be unable to place *Broadway Boogie Woogie* in its proper context. As a result, we will miss the energetic buzz that constitutes its primary aesthetic value. This is where audio guides can help.⁵² They can give us the background knowledge we need to enjoy what is valuable about Mondrian's work.⁵³

9 Appreciating Representational Properties

It is possible to apply Shelley's distinction to another sort of case. When visiting art museums, we often delight in the formal properties of the paintings and sculptures we encounter: their shapes, lines, colors, volumes, etc. But sometimes the pleasure we hope to experience has to do with what

these formal properties represent. The *Mona Lisa* (1503) is an obvious example. What we find beautiful about Leonardo da Vinci's painting is not just his line work and use of color. The beauty also lies in that famous smile. Or, consider Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). Part of what is compelling about this piece is the flatness and sharp edges of the unusual shapes that populate Picasso's canvas. But part of it is also the expressions of intense agony on the faces of the people and animals represented by the unusual, cubist shapes.

What a painting or sculpture represents often feels like something we directly perceive with our physical senses. That the lines, shapes, and colors of the *Mona Lisa* represent a smiling woman, for instance, seems to be something we immediately see. It seems to be given to us as part of our incoming sensory data. Thus, appreciating the representational properties of a work does not seem to be the kind of activity that requires sustained reflection or significant background knowledge. As a result, audio guides do not seem to have much value in this context.

Yet, it is a familiar point in the philosophy of perception that judgments about representational properties are the product of inferences.⁵⁴ That a work represents *x* rather than *y* is a conclusion we reach by subtle and often unconscious reasoning rather than immediate intuition. In other words, that we perceive a work as depicting *x* rather than *y* is an *interpretation* of our incoming sensory data rather than a constituent part of it.

In many cases, these perceptual inferences are easy and obvious. They happen so quickly and so reliably that we do not realize they are taking place. For example, few people have trouble determining what the lines, shapes, and colors represent on the canvas of the *Mona Lisa*. Most of us readily see a smiling woman. Yet, perceptual processing is not always so facile. Abstract and expressionist art often befuddles us, for instance. We study the formal properties of a particular work, trying to organize them in our mind's eye, but we cannot discern what if anything they depict. Sometimes the slippage lasts for only a second. This is what happens with Picasso's cubist paintings. Although they may initially puzzle us, we soon recognize faces, instruments, body parts, animals, and so forth. In other cases, the proper interpretation perpetually evades us. We need someone to tell us what the work represents before we can see it for ourselves.

Consider the comic strip *Doodles* created by Roger Price in the 1950s. Price's *Doodles* consist of a few simple lines and abstract shapes printed in black and white. What these lines and shapes represent, however, is not obvious. They form a visual riddle that becomes humorous once solved. For example, one of the *Doodles* contains a series of five black circles against a white background. Four of them are arranged in a square pattern; the fifth is slightly off to the left but centered horizontally on the square. The caption reads, "An elephant on its back in a swimming pool."⁵⁵ The four circles comprising the square represent the elephant's feet; the fifth represents the end of the elephant's trunk.

Price's *Doodles* come with captions that clue us into what their formal elements represent. Many paintings and sculptures are accompanied by captions or titles that serve the same function.⁵⁶ But we are not always so fortunate. Some works do not have captions or titles. And even when they

do, these captions or titles do not always give us the information we need to interpret them properly. Audio guides may help in such cases.⁵⁷

Take Cornelia Parker's *Edge of England* (1999). It is a large-scale installation consisting of chalk fragments taken from a rockfall at the Dover Cliffs in England. The misshapen pieces of chalk, most about the size of a softball, are suspended from the ceiling by thin wires, forming a kind of curtain. On the most obvious level, Parker's work recreates the falling of the rocks during the storm that loosed them from the cliff. The curtain of chalk offers an image of the rocks mid-fall and thus evokes a sense of the sublime. But *Edge of England* has a deeper meaning we cannot discern just by looking at it or reading its title. As the audio guide supplied by the Milwaukee Art Museum tells us, the Dover Cliffs are a notorious place for suicide jumps.⁵⁸ Thus, the pieces of chalk hanging from the ceiling also represent the jumpers falling to their deaths. Upon learning of this symbolism, our emotional reaction to *Edge of England* changes. It takes on a tragic dimension it did not previously possess, which deepens our enjoyment. Unless we already knew the cultural significance of the Dover Cliffs, we would have missed this additional level of value were it not for the audio guide.

10 Appreciating Perceptual Properties

The preceding arguments do not disarm all the objections against audio guides surveyed earlier in the paper. In particular, they leave standing the objection based on aesthetic empiricism. Some museum visitors may wish to appreciate only those properties of a work that they can directly perceive with their eyes and ears. They might concede Shelley's point that they cannot appreciate something without first grasping it. But they have no more desire to engage in reflection at the grasping stage than at the appreciating stage. They are content to enjoy with their senses what they can detect with their senses. If this means missing out on some of the context-sensitive properties or representational properties of some of the artworks, then so be it.

I believe audio guides can still serve visitors who have this empiricist mindset. Two points help explain why. First, audio guides often discuss salient sensory properties of the artwork on display. Despite their reputation, they do not only focus on contextual matters. Second, the sensory properties that audio guides point out are not always discernible to the average museum visitor. For the average museum visitor is a novice when it comes to art appreciation, and a novice often fails to see what an expert can see. Perception is a skill, after all. And those who have cultivated it can detect things that remain obscure to those who have not.

An analogy may help. No one has an innate ability to differentiate between kinds or vintages of wine. The flavors run together for the novice wine taster and everything ends up tasting more or less the same. If beginners do notice a difference between two bottles, they often cannot identify its precise nature. They lack the ability to appreciate the nuances of their gustatory experience. Of course, the novice can refine their palette with practice. But becoming a master sommelier able to detect and describe all the flavor notes of a specific bottle takes years of training. Thus, those who

lack this training will need a sommelier's input if they wish to enjoy all that a given glass of wine has to offer.

The same holds for appreciating visual art.⁵⁹ Many paintings have nuanced differences in hues, values, and saturations of color that are easy to miss. They can also exhibit slight variations in line quality that are not obvious. In addition, the effects generated by different paint application tools, mediums, grounds, gels, pastes, and varnishes can be so subtle that they are almost impossible to detect. Perceiving these details is not just a matter of taking one's time. It is also a matter of training. Aesthetic perception is a skill that has to be cultivated.⁶⁰ Of course, in principle, almost anyone can cultivate it. So, in principle, the properties just mentioned can be detected by almost anyone. But the fact is that most of us lack the requisite training. Thus, we need outside help to recognize the properties in question. We need an expert to tell us where and how to look. This is one of the functions of art museum audio guides. They call our attention to the properties of a work that are apparent to an expert but not to a novice.⁶¹

To make the point concrete, consider an extreme case: Ad Reinhardt's *Abstract Painting* (1963). At first glance, it looks like a boring flat black canvas. But this is incorrect. Reinhardt has divided the canvas into a three-by-three grid of squares each of which he has painted a slightly different shade of black. The squares in the four corners of the canvas have a reddish tone. The remaining five squares form a cross-shape. The ones that make up the horizontal band of the cross have a greenish tint; the ones that make up the vertical band have a bluish tint. It takes time for one's eyes to adjust to these subtle variations in color. Even then, they are hard to see. Reinhardt is pressing us beyond our normal perceptual limits. Thus, if there is not an expert on hand to point out to us the different shades of black—or if we are not listening to the audio guide—we are likely to overlook them and so miss the source of the painting's aesthetic value.

11 Qualifications

Let me conclude by appending some qualifications to my endorsement of art museum audio guides. First, listening to the guides is not an all-or-nothing affair. The choice is not between having them direct every aspect of one's visit and eschewing them altogether. There is a middle way. We can begin by looking at a given work without the guides' help. We can try to uncover its important properties by ourselves and attempt to develop our own personal interpretations. We can then consult the guides if we find ourselves stuck, wanting alternative perspectives, or curious about properties of the work we cannot discern for ourselves. Finally, per Nguyen's suggestion, we can use what we learn from the guides as a springboard for making further connections and drawing further conclusions of our own.

Second, art museum audio guides are not for everyone. Their function conflicts with some visitors' aims. The extreme empiricist who wants to enjoy only those sensory properties that are apparent to them given their current level of acuity will find the guides useless. So too will the iconoclast who prizes their autonomy or independence to such a degree that a single word from a

critic will ruin their visit. In addition, as John Falk notes, not all museum visitors go to appreciate the art.⁶² Some go to socialize with friends or family members. Others go to recharge; they seek a peaceful corner of the world in which to relax without being disturbed. Listening to audio guides will not serve such ends.

Third, audio guides will not augment our enjoyment of every work of art. Sometimes we do not need expert instruction to detect and enjoy a work's aesthetic value. Moreover, even in cases where expert input adds something, it does not always add much. Classical realist paintings, such as Johannes Vermeer's *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*, are good examples. The bulk of what is pleasing about them is readily accessible to novices and experts alike. (Somewhat ironically, the audio guide for Vermeer's painting says as much.)⁶³ In addition, some audio guides diminish our enjoyment because they shatter pleasant illusions we have been harboring. For example, discovering that Vermeer used a camera obscura rather than painting freehand may disappoint us.⁶⁴ We may take less delight in his work because (rightly or wrongly) we think he cheated.

Fourth, some audio guides are redundant in that they reproduce the information appearing on the object label or wall text. This is not in keeping with best museum practices, but it happens. There is still something to say in favor of audio guides in such cases, though. For they allow us to look at the work while learning about it rather than having to shift our gaze back and forth between the placard and the work.⁶⁵ This has been shown to aid pictorial comprehension.⁶⁶ Multimodal learning may also have other advantages over unimodal learning. The addition of audio may enhance our recognition and recall of what we visually perceive, for example.⁶⁷ Still, it remains the case that visitors who are content to read the object labels or wall text will not always learn new information by listening to the guides.

With these qualifications in place, let me put forward my final position. Art museum audio guides have more benefits than often assumed. They make us aware of sensory and non-sensory properties that would be difficult or impossible to detect just by looking at or listening to the artworks for ourselves. In so doing, the guides put us in a better position to appreciate the value of the works. They enable us to get more out of them than we otherwise would. Crucially, this conclusion holds even if our goal is just to enjoy the works in a subjective or immediate way. Thus, if employed strategically, audio guides have something to offer most visitors. Or if not most visitors, then at least more than the five percent who currently use them.

Notes

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² For discussion of practical concerns about audio guides, see Jenna Fleming, Phil Getchell, and Jesse Kochis, "Launching the MFA Multimedia Guide: Lessons Learned," in *Museums and the Web 2011: Proceedings*, ed. J. Trant and D. Bearman (Toronto: Archives and Museum Informatics, 2011); Shelley Mannion, Amalia Sabiescu,

and William Robinson, "Innovate or Stagnate: Disrupting the Conventional Audio Guide," in *MW2016: Museums and the Web 2016*, 2016; Diana Marques, Robert Costello, and Brian Alpert, "A Location Based Understanding Of Mobile App User Behavior," in *MW2017: Museums and the Web 2017*, 2017; Jessie Pallud and Emmanuel Monod, "User Experience of Museum Technologies: The Phenomenological Scales," *European Journal of Information Systems* 19, no. 5 (2010): 568–80; Stephanie Pau, "Audio That Moves You: Experiments with Location-Aware Storytelling in the SFMoMA App," in *MW2017: Museums and the Web 2017*, 2017; Palmyre Pierroux and Sten Ludvigsen, "Communication Interrupted: Textual Practices and Digital Interactives in Art Museums," in *The Connected Museum: Social Media and Museum Communication*, ed. Kim Schrøder and Kirsten Drotner (New York: Routledge, 2013), 153–76; Nancy Proctor, "The Museum Is Mobile: Cross-Platform Content Design for Audiences on the Go," in *Museums and the Web 2010: Proceedings*, ed. J. Trant and D. Bearman (Toronto: Archives and Museum Informatics, 2010); Hiromi Sekiguchi and Hirokazu Yoshimura, "What Impressions Do People Have Regarding Mobile Guidance Services In Museums?: Designing a Questionnaire That Uses Opinions from the General Public," *Journal of Museum Education* 32, no. 1 (2007): 47–59; Laura Mann and Grace Tung, "A New Look at an Old Friend: Reevaluating the Met's Audio-Guide Service," in *MW2015: Museums and the Web 2015*, 2015; Hirokazu Yoshimura, Hiromi Sekiguchi, and Yoshitaka Yabumoto, "Museum Personnel's Opinions on Mobile Guidance Systems," *Journal of Museum Education* 32, no. 1 (2007): 61–72.

³ For discussion of theoretical concerns about audio guides, see Silvia Filippini-Fantoni and Jonathan P. Bowen, "Mobile Multimedia: Reflections from Ten Years of Practice," in *Digital Technologies and the Museum Experience: Handheld Guides and Other Media*, ed. Loic Tallon and Kevin Walker (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008), 89; Margaret Fleck et al., "From Informing to Remembering: Ubiquitous Systems in Interactive Museums," *IEEE Pervasive Computing* 1, no. 2 (2002): 13–21; Ben Gammon and Alexandra Burch, "Designing Mobile Digital Experiences," in *Digital Technologies and the Museum Experience: Handheld Guides and Other Media*, ed. Loic Tallon and Kevin Walker (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008), 38–41; Tsvi Kuflik et al., "A Visitor's Guide in an Active Museum," *Journal on Computing and Cultural Heritage* 3, no. 3 (2011): 2; Oliviero Stock et al., "Adaptive, Intelligent Presentation of Information for the Museum Visitor in PEACH," *User Modeling and User-Adapted Interaction* 17, no. 3 (July 1, 2007): 258; Loic Tallon, "Introduction: Mobile, Digital, and Personal," in *Digital Technologies and the Museum Experience: Handheld Guides and Other Media*, ed. Loic Tallon and Kevin Walker (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008), xx–xxi.

⁴ Pierroux and Ludvigsen, "Communication Interrupted: Textual Practices and Digital Interactives in Art Museums," 153.

⁵ Ross Parry and Mayra Ortiz-Williams, "How Shall We Label Our Exhibit Today? Applying the Principles of On-Line Publishing to an On-Site Exhibition," *Museums and the Web 2007*, 2007; Peter Samis, "The Exploded Museum," in *Digital Technologies and the Museum Experience: Handheld Guides and Other Media*, ed. Loic Tallon and Kevin Walker (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008), 5.

⁶ Cf. Pierroux and Ludvigsen, "Communication Interrupted: Textual Practices and Digital Interactives in Art Museums," 153; Jeffrey K. Smith and Pablo P. L. Tinio, "Audibly Engaged: Talking the Walk," in *Digital Technologies and the Museum Experience: Handheld Guides and Other Media*, ed. Loic Tallon and Kevin Walker (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008), 63.

⁷ See Noël Carroll, *On Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 84–152.

⁸ Tallon, "Introduction: Mobile, Digital, and Personal," xiii.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xvii.

¹² Jerrold Levinson, "Artistic Worth and Personal Taste," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 3 (2010): 225–33.

¹³ Jerrold Levinson, "Hume's Standard of Taste: The Real Problem," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60, no. 3 (2002): 234.

¹⁴ Matthew Kieran, "Why Ideal Critics Are Not Ideal: Aesthetic Character, Motivation and Value," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 48, no. 3 (2008): 278–94; Dominic McIver Lopes, "Aesthetic Experts, Guides to Value," *The*

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¹⁵ Nicholas Riggle, "Levinson on the Aesthetic Ideal," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71, no. 3 (2013): 277–81; Nick Riggle, "On the Aesthetic Ideal," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55, no. 4 (2015): 433–47; see also Levinson, "Artistic Worth and Personal Taste," 228–29.

¹⁶ Alan H. Goldman, *Aesthetic Value* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 38; Ross, *Two Thumbs Up*, 134–58.

¹⁷ Ellen Giusti, "Improving Visitor Access," in *Digital Technologies and the Museum Experience: Handheld Guides and Other Media*, ed. Loic Tallon and Kevin Walker (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008), 99; Samis, "The Exploded Museum," 5–6.

¹⁸ Ross Parry, "Afterward: The Future in Our Hands? Putting Potential into Practice," in *Digital Technologies and the Museum Experience: Handheld Guides and Other Media*, ed. Loic Tallon and Kevin Walker (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008), 186–87; Samis, "The Exploded Museum," 7–10.

¹⁹ Levinson, "Artistic Worth and Personal Taste," 228–29; Jerrold Levinson, "Reply to Riggle: Aesthetic History, Personality, and Profile," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71, no. 3 (2013): 281–88.

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²² Meskin, "Aesthetic Testimony," 69.

²³ C. Thi Nguyen, "Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement," *Mind* 129, no. 516 (2020): 1131–32. For further discussion of the acquaintance principle, see Malcolm Budd, "The Acquaintance Principle," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 43, no. 4 (2003): 386–92; Robert Hopkins, "How to Form Aesthetic Belief: Interpreting the Acquaintance Principle," *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics* 3, no. 3 (2006); Hopkins, "How to Be a Pessimist about Aesthetic Testimony"; Dominic McIver Lopes, "Aesthetic Acquaintance," *The Modern Schoolman* 86, no. 3/4 (2009): 267–81; Samantha Matherne, "Aesthetic Autonomy and Norms of Exposure," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 2021; Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects: With Six Supplementary Essays*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 223.

²⁴ Lopes, "Aesthetic Acquaintance," 267.

²⁵ Nguyen, "Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement," 1132–33. For further discussion of the autonomy principle, see Robert Hopkins, "Kant, Quasi-Realism, and the Autonomy of Aesthetic Judgement," *European Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (2001): 166–89; Hopkins, "How to Be a Pessimist about Aesthetic Testimony"; Andrew McGonigal, "The Autonomy of Aesthetic Judgement," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 46, no. 4 (2006): 331–48.

²⁶ Robson, "Aesthetic Testimony," 6.

²⁷ Nguyen, "Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement," 1137.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1137–49.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1132.

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- ³⁰ Ibid., 1139, 1147.
- ³¹ Giusti, "Improving Visitor Access," 98.
- ³² Ibid., 99; Samis, "The Exploded Museum," 5–6.
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- ³⁴ This is one of the purposes of the audio guide for Duchamp's *Fountain* provided by the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. See <https://museum.imj.org.il/en/audioguides/nplh/page/?id=465>, accessed August 5, 2019. *Fountain* was exhibited in the Israeli Museum as part of the No Place Like Home exhibition (25 February 2017–19 August 2017), which was curated by Adina Kamien-Kazhdan.
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- ³⁷ Gregory Currie, *An Ontology of Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 17–18.
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- ³⁹ Carroll, *On Criticism*, 153–96.
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- ⁴⁸ See Kendall L. Walton, "Categories of Art," *The Philosophical Review* 79, no. 3 (1970): 334–67.
- ⁴⁹ Sue Spaid, *The Philosophy of Curatorial Practice: Between Work and World* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 119–25.
- ⁵⁰ Lopes, "The Myth of (Non-Aesthetic) Artistic Value," 527–28.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 527.
- ⁵² Good curation also helps with this problem. See Spaid, *The Philosophy of Curatorial Practice*, 119–62.
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- ⁶⁴ See National Gallery of Art, "Johannes Vermeer, Girl with the Red Hat, c. 1665/1666," 2021, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.60.html>.
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