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Sherri Irvin, "Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art"

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Sherri Irvin. *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*. Oxford University Press 2022. 288 pp. \$34.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199688210).

‘George...who keeps learning the games we play as quickly as I can change the rules.’
Edward Albee, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Sherri Irvin’s latest book is a marvel of provocative philosophical insight, grassroots research, and accessible art writing. The book’s first provocation is its title. Is ‘immaterial’ supposed to mean non-physical or insignificant? Both, it turns out, but with a twist—as we come to find out, immateriality refers to the aspects of artworks that do not neatly fall under traditional notions of what constitutes an art medium, but it also serves as an ironic sendup of people who hold on to such notions for dear life. If there is a problem here, it is the conceptual turn in 20th and 21st century art and the range of reactionary responses it has been met with on the part of broader art audiences. What exacerbates this problem is that, despite their vested interest, artworld insiders have not found sufficient argumentative ammunition to disambiguate the art historical developments that often alienate the general public, let alone the motivation and patience to do so. Luckily, Irvin has both in spades.

Just like Martha in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the artworld often changes the rules of the art game faster than general audiences, or anyone, could catch up to. Irvin acknowledges the frustration this causes and finds an elegant philosophical solution for it. She is aware of the derogatory potential of identifying the life of art as a game, but she needs the analogy to communicate a simple truth about contemporary art—rules are, by now, integral to the making, display, spectatorship and preservation of art. The greatest feat of Irvin’s book might be the way she reconciles the simplicity of this observation with the complexity of the mysterious cauldron in which these rules are forged—centering artists’ creative choices but also taking the input of curators, gallerists, conservators and other artworld insiders into account.

Irvin uses Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in LA)*, 1991 to illustrate both the nature of the problem at hand and her proposed philosophical solution. For those who have experienced the work in an institutional context, the presence of a pile of candy in a gallery corner, barring any additional information, might have appeared as the typical art gimmick. After all, skeptical contemporary art audiences are reasonably likely to encounter a pair of socks on a gallery floor, bump into a non-descript postcard holder, or end up marveling at the mundaneness of a broom stood up on its bristles. These are, in fact, three of the many objects included in an exhibition I saw at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2018, titled ‘Stories of Almost Everyone’ and curated by Aram Moshayedi with the assistance of Ikechukwu Onyewuenyi. Just like Gonzalez-Torres’ famous candy installation, most of the artworks in ‘Stories’ would only speak to a viewer who had at least a modicum of art-historical awareness and spent the time reading the corresponding wall texts. Additionally, with a good number of them, their very status as artworks seemed to hang on these texts and the art-making and art appreciation conditions they painstakingly articulated. If Andy Campbell, an art historian and critic, reported experiencing ‘a kind of post-conceptual malaise’ in his review of the exhibition for *Artforum*, imagine what your uncle’s response would have been



(Campbell, Andy. 'Stories of Almost Everyone.' *Artforum*, May 2018).

Irvin's cure for this malaise is powerful and direct. She argues that art has always been bundled with rules, but contemporary art has just been more intentional about bringing them to the forefront. For the cynic, this might be a function of the hermetic self-indulgence of conceptual art, but Irvin reads the picture differently. Instead of seeing the introduction of rules as willful gimmickry foreclosing access and understanding, she regards it as a contribution to 'the work's artistic functioning just as choices about the work's material elements do,... imbuing [artists'] works with artistic and aesthetic value or with the capacity to make certain kinds of artistic statement' (126) And, should this appear too heady for general audiences, Irvin reminds us that an artist's business is not only to make things the rest of us could not make, but also to 'think thoughts the rest of us would never have thought' (232). This renders the forging and articulating of rules a matter of honesty and communicability rather than its projected opposite.

The specifically philosophical contribution Irvin offers here is her subtle revision of the accepted ontological structure of art and the unburdening of our traditional notions of what constitutes an artistic medium. In terms of ontology, she mines philosophical aesthetics for a definition of artworks that can accommodate the dynamism of contemporary art. The resulting picture is dynamic as well—identifying artworks as semi-abstract entities, which originate with 'the artist's sanction,' might or might not involve particular physical objects, and are modally flexible on account of their openness to evolutionary change (114-126). As to our notion of medium, Irvin persuasively uses multiple examples to demonstrate that rules are 'symbolic resources' that structure both art-making and art appreciation (146). In other words, rules themselves merit the status of artistic medium.

In order to flesh out these philosophical arguments, Irvin helpfully divides the rules of contemporary art into three basic categories—display, conservation and participation. She devotes a chapter to each of these, outlining both the dynamics of rule formation and the specific ways in which rules become a constitutive part of a given artwork. This is, predictably, a messy subject because the different kinds of rules often overlap or contradict each other. What adds another level of complexity is the fact that in a great deal of cases these rules are fugitive in character—pliant to modification and hard to formalize. But, again, amidst all of this rule unruliness, Irvin finds patterns of coherence and intelligibility.

One of the many virtues of Irvin's account is that she teases out the subtle difference between rules and conventions. The simplest way to summarize it is to think of rules as internal to the artwork and its life, while of conventions as a set of external conditions buttressing the broader enterprise of art-making and art appreciation. To use one of Irvin's examples, Fiona Banner's *Shy Nude*, 2007—a painting intended to be viewed from the back—relies both on the internal rule of reversing the frame to face the wall and on the external convention that painting most usually involves the application of pigment across a two-dimensional surface. It is clear that Banner's custom rule undermines the convention that paintings are to be viewed from the front, thus highlighting the interplay between artistic choice and conventional presumption. Again, the artist's rule does a lot of heavy symbolic lifting—reminding us of the conventions of painting, revealing the mechanics of creative exploration, and inviting the viewer to ponder their relationships with both.

Despite possible charges of whimsy and obscurantism, it is clear that Irvin sees what she calls ‘the artist’s sanction’ as a dialogical proposition. She has been finessing the concept for the better part of twenty years and *Immaterial* offers her most developed, and to my lights definitive, account of it. This is because, with the introduction of rules in the conversation about contemporary art, Irvin accomplishes something that both good philosophy and good art do—she makes complexity intelligible. The rules that govern Gonzalez-Torres’ *Untitled*—that visitors should be allowed to take some of the candy and that exhibiting institutions should regularly replenish it—are a manifestation of the artist’s sanction because they are an inviolable originary gesture of ideation and creativity. One rule secures the cumulative weight of the candy pile as a reference to the body of the artist’s lover, while the second represents that body’s expiration from AIDS-related complications. But, at the same time, these rules are also dialogical in their openness to curatorial and spectatorial resonance, occupying a space of negotiation that fuels their evolutionary flexibility.

Irvin does not just explain how the openness of contemporary art operates, but also models it in her prose. Hers is the rare philosophical study that dwells both on the life of art and in it, her analysis of particular examples rendered kaleidoscopically rich by a commitment to painstaking disambiguation and an infectious love of art. *Immaterial* leaves some of my questions unanswered, but it leaves none of them unanswerable. This is the mark of a book that manages to make sense while keeping all doors of sense-making ajar. Irvin claims that that is precisely what contemporary art does. And she mounts a convincing case that trailing a step behind artists in the game of creative meaning-making is a small concession in exchange for the spoils of aesthetic and cognitive delight art continues to afford us.

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