Abstract for

“The Artist as Cultural Agent: A Theory of Artistic Practice Extrapolated from the Philosophy of Joseph Margolis” by Aili W. Bresnahan

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Both artworks and selves, according to the philosophy of Joseph Margolis, are what he calls “culturally emergent entities.” This paper will attempt to show the way that artists, both as selves and as skilled “artists,” by which I mean trained practitioners of doing and making art as deeply entrenched and contextualized cultural agents, create “new” works of art that can communicate with and are interpretable within a cultural context. So far Margolis’ overriding focus on artworks has been on the metaphysics of these works as cultural entities that are distinct from and not reducible to natural or physical entities. In similar vein his work on the self has been to show how selves or persons are not reducible to biology and how thought is not reducible to the physical brain and body. Both artworks and selves, on his view, thus have “careers” that change with the course and flux of history, interpretation and reinterpretation rather than “natures” that remain stable for any purpose other than numerical identity. The question for this paper, then, is how such an encultured artist, who is also an individuable “self,” can within this framework construct an identifiable “career” that is both from culture and that develops culture in a way that involves a particular, as well as collective, contribution. The answer will be one that provides a theory of the artist as cultural agent: a person and thinking and doing practitioner that emerges from and works within a cultural context in which he or she acquires the tools and skills necessary to make something through the development of his or her natural competencies in innovative ways that make use of historical, cultural and lingual resources at his or her disposal. Indeed, as such, Joseph Margolis himself is an analog for such an artist, being both a product of his culture and historical era and a master craftsman and inventor who has woven strands from both analytic and continental philosophy into a discursive theory that is at once made of culture and emergent from it in a way that can be construed as a development of rather than restatement of what has gone before. In continuing his work into the realm of artistic practice this paper thus aims at both cultural (philosophical) emergence, and Margolis-emergence: it is an exercise in both interpreting Margolis and reinterpreting Margolis in an attempt to carry his philosophy of art, and of culture, into the next historical era in the philosophy of art, one in which the artist, not just the artistic product and not just the spectator, will come to the fore.