

Introduction

In December 2019, the artist Maurizio Cattelan taped a banana on the wall at the Art Basel Miami Beach and sold it for \$120,000 as an artwork called “Comedian.” Another artist later ate that banana. The stunt could be seen as a criticism of the contemporary art system. Fourteen months later, the graphic designer Beeple sold his digital work “The First 5000 Days,” which contains 5000 digital images of not much artistic value, for \$69.3 million as a non-fungible token (NFT). This act could not be understood as a critique of the art scene. How much nonsense, meaninglessness, or bullshit is permitted in art in the twenty-first century? This special issue of *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics* presents reflections on the relationship between art and bullshit by analyzing the phenomenon in various historical and geographical contexts.

Taurascatics—a term coined by James Fredal in 2011—is the academic study of bullshit (Fredal 2011). Scholars characterize bullshit through a function of contextual factors such as having an instrumental indifference for the truth, being in error, or as acts of posing performative propositions for some appearance or manipulative effect, even if it is an unintentional self-manipulation or an effect of psychological compositions. In most of the literature on this subject, the notion “bullshit” refers to Harry Frankfurt’s definition from a 1986 essay. Bullshit often produces unfounded or incoherent claims and irrational behaviors with an air of significance or authenticity, but it always does so without lying. “To bullshit” means not to care about the truth. Liars are careful in concealing the truth, whereas the bullshitter is not. Bullshit is also different from the baby-talk of babbling or anything due to forgetting, repression, denial, confusion, misunderstanding, or cognitive bias.¹ G.A. Cohen more recently developed the notion of *deep bullshit*, which

¹ See Belfiore 2009, 343; Bergstrom & West 2020, 38-40; Botz-Bornstein 2015, 317; Eubanks & Schaeffer 2008, 383; Frankfurt 2005, 30, 56; Graeber 2018, 9-10, 205; Petrocelli 2018, 249; Spicer 2020, 3, 5; Turpin et al. 2019, 659; 2021, 1; Wreen 2013, 108, 111-112.

is an unclarifiable unclarity, independent of intention (Cohen 2002). In addition, David Graeber provides a negation test for bullshit. In post-industrial societies, increasingly pointless tasks are invented, and many jobs are meaningless. The negation test suggests that “if the position were eliminated, it would make no discernible difference in the world” (Graeber 2018, 2). If nothing significant happens *without* the job, we can conclude that the job was a bullshit job. Generally, art quickly passes Graeber’s test, while Cohen’s *deep bullshit* would not.

Bullshitting emerges as a social activity that occurs whenever someone is pressured into voicing an opinion with insufficient knowledge about a topic (e.g., alienated from storytelling, tradition, theory, or historical contexts) in an environment where assertions receive little critique (Petrocelli 2018) or where there is not enough care for social wellbeing (Erlandsson et al. 2018). Bullshitting is not always wrong; as a matter of fact, sometimes it makes social interactions easier. Bullshitting might involve making insincere promises or, hidden in redundant details, telling “white lies.” People often use the term to label anything they dislike as a reactionary kind of critique.

Bullshit is inclusive and interpretative. Anything can be called bullshit due to performativity, but calling it out requires acts of its perception and cognition, such as behaviors or “language with specific formal features.” As Stephen Kidd notes in the context of Greek philosophy, “to call something ‘nonsense’ [φλυαρέω, φλυαρία, or λῆρος] is a pragmatic act which deprives an utterance of force and meaning, and second, that certain formal features can contribute to the impression of nonsense more readily than others” (Kidd 2014, 17). Bullshit, when objectively identified with specific formal features, can still be interpreted in such a way that meaning is discovered. Sometimes bullshit takes the form of a “deepity,” which “[...] is a proposition that *seems* both important and true—and profound—but that achieves this effect by being ambiguous. On one reading, it is manifestly false, but it would be earth-shattering if it were true; on the other reading, it is true but trivial” (Dennett 2013, 56; see also Leeuwen 2018).

Recent scholarship has studied bullshit in art practice and aesthetic theory.² The main questions of this issue deal with the role of nonsense or deception within the domain of the arts, in addition to its techniques and media. The volume also addresses how falsehood, unfalsifiable claims, or nonsense are agential and give a voice to creative and fictive processes. Accordingly, it provides in-depth reflections on faux materials, objects, human in-

² See Botz-Bornstein 2015; Devenport 2015; Duncombe & Harrebye 2016; Fiducia 2010; Herbert 2021; Turpin et al. 2019.

struments, relationships, and organizations. The issue aims to insert art into the vast discourse on bullshit, at a time when the qualification of a work qua art has become increasingly problematic and when artistic success depends, more than ever before, on its sponsorship by a few with clout.

The issue starts with thoughts not about art but about “artspeak,” a word that **Pascal Unbehaun** employs to designate the pseudo-profound language used in exhibition catalog texts. Most often written in a highly abstract academic style, artspeak has a unique relation to truth. With the rise of conceptual art in the 1960s, art increasingly needed comments and explanations. Already then (as shows Lev Lafayette in his contribution), but especially in the 1990s, art was more often connected to a process than to a completed work. There are fake complexities, pseudo-scientific and pseudo-profound talk, and repetitions in artspeak.

Lev Lafayette explores American Abstract Expressionism in the U.S., which he links to particular political purposes. Abstract Expressionism was conceived in contrast to “the regimented, traditional, and narrow” nature of Soviet Socialist Realism and thus supported by the CIA as a kind of aesthetic propaganda. The removal of any aesthetic representation in Abstract Expressionism in favor of the subjective experience of the production, that is, the interest in the process (action painting) and not in the outcome, creates what can be called a “bullshit aesthetics.” It is meant to be a sincere expression of the author’s internal state and pretends to have a deeper meaning when, in fact, meaning is negated. Like this, Abstract Expressionism engages in truthfulness and is “bullshit art” rather than a mere misrepresentation. Lying was instead the enterprise of the enemy’s side, that is, Socialist Realism.

Lucas Scripter distinguishes bullshit art from bullshitting *about* art, which connects to Unbehaun’s “artspeak.” Bullshit art corresponds to a perceived discrepancy between a work of art and its social standing. Like Botz-Bornstein and Dadlez, Scripter discusses the relationships between bullshit and kitsch. For him, “Bullshit art” is a particular category of aesthetic failure that stands in a contingent relationship to kitsch. Scripter also analyzes the environment of the art object. Bullshit occurs in a social space of pretense, which creates a mismatch between the prestige attached to a work of art and the question of whether a work of art merits or deserves such status. Bullshit art is not simply lousy art, but it has an inflated or hyped character.

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein extends these analyses of art, kitsch, and bullshit. According to him, art is bullshit from the beginning; it cannot be rejected because it misrepresents reality. Yet, there remains a difference be-

tween art and “regular bullshit.” Art is expected to deliver aesthetic representations of reality, whereas the bullshitter embellishes reality when they are not supposed to. Art is bullshit, but it should not be bullshit art. Botz-Bornstein examines the NFT world through this lens as a mixture of late capitalism and populist aesthetics in which the idea of an “adequate artistic expression” has become almost impossible.

Eva Dadlez comes back to the kitsch/bullshit discourse and analyzes the phenomenon of grandstanding. The purpose of this subcategory of bullshit is “to diminish the impression of ignorance or create an impression of expertise rather than to convey information.” Grandstanding is the ethical version of kitsch: “Grandstanding transgresses moral norms in much the same way that bullshitting and kitsch transgress epistemic and aesthetic norms.” Its intention is to establish one’s moral credentials.

Adrian Mróz shifts the attention to ancient philosophy and compares the bullshit artist with the sophist. There is a specific relation between *aletheia*, the indeterminacy of knowledge, and bullshit artists. Mróz elaborates on Bernard Stiegler’s claim that the philosopher’s knowledge, *episteme*, has been privileged over the sophist’s *techne* ever since Plato. Sophistic thinking is founded on technical ambiguity, trickery or *apate*, opinion, or *doxa*. Art is the medium of the aesthetic experience of recollecting something that escapes clear demonstrations and exact proofs. There are thus explicit relations between sophistry and bullshitting as forms of nonknowledge. At the same time, Mróz recognizes that bullshit and art share a mystery. In his opinion, the entire elimination of bullshit would also produce an inhumane reality.

A bullshit aesthetic is often used to gain the listener’s trust. **Aaron Weddle** recognizes that bullshit is a performative aesthetic strategy. He analyzes the relationship between bullshit qua attitude and aesthetics. Weddle describes the concerns at the forefront of the political philosophy debate and links these challenges to debates in linguistic philosophy in a way that has obvious aesthetic implications. Bullshit is an art and also a feature of art. Further, it is a form of communication.

The remaining authors analyze concrete aesthetic phenomena to detect bullshit. **Sergio J. Aguilar Alcalá** finds much bullshit in documentaries and documentary theory. Documentaries occupy a place of truth, which means that a documentary is not a documentary because it makes true statements, but that we take their statements as true because it is a documentary: “Even if everything a documentary says is false, it is nonetheless a film about the truth.” There is a clear bullshit logic in this constellation.

Sarp Tanrıdağ analyzes the constructive and speculative forms of bullshitting in the art field through the etchings of the eighteenth-century architect and artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Tanrıdağ finds that Piranesi's work is a potential form of bullshit art because it is manipulative and fictional. In appearance, Piranesi's works are "documentary" works. However, the etchings are not meant to express the truth or tell a lie but rather to convey Piranesi's own ideology. The artist breaks away from reality, not to deceive people but to trigger a reevaluation of the Roman ruins and the Roman legacy.

Sara Borghero explores the possibilities offered by bad art through the "Bad Art" project and the Bad Painting Movement, an initiative that defies the norms and practices of the art system and puts forward nonconformist artworks. The result is artistic liberation through irony and deprecation. "Bad Art" painters find the existing art scene clinical, elitist, whitewashed, and market-oriented: "Art was boiled down to a commodity and investment rather than... well, art!" The new NFT world stands in a strange relationship with this alternative movement, a relationship that can perhaps best be defined by evaluating the concept of bullshit art. Both preach that "the art world is changing." Borghero analyzes the work of Anna Choutova and also refers to Tommaso Labranca's definition of trash, which is different from kitsch and camp.

Katarína Ihringová examines the *trompe l'oeil* as an instance of bullshit. It is a visual depiction that pretends to be reality. Plato, in his statements on *mimesis*, considered visual art to be a way to obscure the view of truth and lies. A painter does not display the real truth but only an impression of it. If the imitator does not have to know the real truth, is *mimesis* then a form of bullshit? Ihringová concentrates on the appearance called *trompe l'oeil*. Does it create its own version of the truth? She presents various modern Slovak painters who have used this technique.

Bibliography

1. Belfiore Eleonora (2009), "On bullshit in cultural policy practice and research: Notes from the British case", *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 15 (3), pp. 343-359, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286630902806080>.
2. Botz-Bornstein Thorsten (2015) "Kitsch and Bullshit", *Philosophy and Literature*, 39 (2), pp. 305-321, <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2015.0053>.
3. Cohen Gerald A. (2002), "Deeper into Bullshit" [in:] S. Buss & L. Overton (eds.), *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, MIT Press, pp. 321-344, [on-

- line] <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/592b5bbfd482e9898c67fd98/t/5cf95d58f9fec1000139c9d6/1559846232847/deeperintobullshit.pdf>.
4. Danto Arthur (1964), "The Artworld", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 61 (19), pp. 571-584, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2022937>.
 5. Dennett Daniel C. (2013), *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking*, W. W. Norton & Company.
 6. Devenport Alexander (2015, November 14), *The pretentious show ep11—Is modern art bullshit?*, [online] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqYITSaBEWM&t=326s>.
 7. Duncombe Stephen, Harrebye Silas (2016, December 8), *Can Art Save Us from Bullshit?*, Public Seminar, [online] <https://publicseminar.org/2016/12/can-art-save-us-from-bullshit/>.
 8. Egan David (2018, October 31), "Calling Bullshit", *The Point Magazine*, [online] <https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/calling-bullshit/>.
 9. Erlandsson Arvid, Nilsson Artur, Tinghög Gustav, Västfjäll Daniel (2018), "Bullshit-sensitivity predicts prosocial behavior", *PLOS ONE*, 13 (7), e0201474, [online] <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0201474>.
 10. Eubanks Philip, Schaeffer John D. (2008), "A Kind Word for Bullshit: The Problem of Academic Writing", *College Composition and Communication*, 59 (3), pp. 372-388.
 11. Fiduccia Joanna (2010, June 1), "Report: Bullshit! Calling Out Contemporary Art", *MAP Magazine*, [online] <https://mapmagazine.co.uk/report-bullshit-calling-out>.
 12. Frankfurt Harry G. (2005), *On Bullshit*, Princeton University Press.
 13. Fredal James (2011), "Rhetoric and Bullshit", *College English*, 73 (3), pp. 243-259.
 14. Graeber David (2018), *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, Penguin Books.
 15. Herbert Martin (2021, February 23), "Why We Tolerate the Artworld's Bullshit", *Art Review*, [online] <https://artreview.com/why-we-tolerate-artworld-bullshit-covid-19/>.
 16. Kidd Stephen E. (2014), "Greek notions of nonsense", [in:] *Nonsense and Meaning in Ancient Greek Comedy*, Cambridge University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107279322>.
 17. Leeuwen Neil Van (2018, May 11), *On Deepities and Bullshit*, Philosophy Talk, [online] <https://www.philosophytalk.org/blog/deepities-and-bullshit>.
 18. Maes Hans, Schaubroeck Katrien (2006), "Different Kinds and Aspects of Bullshit", [in:] G. Hardcastle & R. Reisch (eds.), *Bullshit and Philosophy*, Open Court, pp. 171-182.
 19. Petrocelli John V. (2018), "Antecedents of bullshitting", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 76, pp. 249-258, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2018.03.004>.
 20. Spicer André (2020), "Playing the Bullshit Game: How Empty and Misleading Communication Takes Over Organizations", *Organization Theory*, 1 (2), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2631787720929704>.
 21. Turpin Martin Harry, Kara-Yakoubian Mane, Walker Alexander C., Walker Heather E.K., Fugelsang Jonathan A., Stolz Jennifer A. (2021), "Bullshit Ability as an Honest Signal of Intelligence", *Evolutionary Psychology*, 19 (2), <https://doi.org/10.1177/14747049211000317>.
 22. Turpin Martin Harry, Walker Alexander C., Kara-Yakoubian Mane, Gabert Nina N., Fugelsang Jonathan A., Stolz Jennifer A. (2019), "Bullshit makes the art grow profounder", *Judgment and Decision Making*, 14 (6), pp. 658-670.
 23. Wreen Michael (2013), "A P.S. on B.S.: Some Remarks on Humbug and Bullshit", *Metaphilosophy*, 44 (102), pp. 105-115, <https://doi.org/10.1111/meta.12021>.