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Provocation in Philosophy and Art

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Abstract: Provocation is an integral part of Socrates' philosophical method. Does provocation have a similar methodological function in art? My tentative answer is no. In the Socratic method, provocation is used both on an individual level to force a person to think better (preferably in ethical matters) and on a general level in order to keep a society awake. A society should never rest but "be stirred into life." Philosophy is a teleological practice with truth or enlightenment as its telos. Art has no well-defined telos, the place and use of provocation in art is therefore debatable. But for art to be something rather than anything, I argue that a provocative work of art has to provide for the aesthetic qualities of how the provocation is performed. Provocation without instrumental qualities is atypical in philosophy, whereas provocation without intrinsic qualities is atypical in art. Using this as a normative guide, we may claim that instrumental success is more important than intrinsic success in philosophy and that the opposite holds for art, as far as provocation is concerned. I conclude by commenting on two Swedish examples of provocation in art from this perspective.

Keywords: Provocation, Socratic Method, Art

Provocation in the Socratic Method

Many aspects of Socrates' way of doing philosophy go under the label of "the Socratic method." Generally, this label stands for his method of finding out the truth (often in a moral matter) by asking questions. Sometimes Socrates distinguishes between asking and teaching:

I shall only ask him, and not teach him, and he shall share the enquiry with me: and do you watch and see if you find me telling or explaining anything to him, instead of eliciting his opinion (*Meno*, 84 c, d).

At other times Socrates does not seem to make this distinction, as when he in *Symposium* tells us about what he learned from his own teacher Diotima:

I will rehearse a tale of love which I heard from Diotima of Mantinea, a woman wise in this and in many other kinds of knowledge [...] She was my instructress in the art of love, and I shall repeat to you what she said to me, beginning with the admissions made by Agathon, which are nearly if not quite the same which I made to the wise woman when she questioned me [...] I said to her in nearly the same words which he used to me, that Love was a mighty god, and likewise fair; and she proved to me as I

proved to him that, by my own showing, Love was neither fair nor good [...] (201 d–e).

I cite this passage for several reasons. First, it suggests that Socrates also regards the method of questioning as a method of instructing. There seems to be no necessary opposition between asking or questioning and teaching. Second, the passage also suggests that Diotima might be one of the most important sources of inspiration for western philosophy. Her authenticity has been questioned; but since Plato mostly fills his dialogues with real people, we have no reason to believe that Diotima is more fictitious than any of his other characters.¹ Whitehead was probably exaggerating when he famously described the philosophical tradition as a series of footnotes to Plato; but without Plato philosophy would indeed not be philosophy as we know it. Furthermore, without Socrates Plato would definitely not be Plato as we know him. That is why the mere suspicion that Socrates' teachings had not been possible without Diotima is so thrilling. Indeed, to judge from *Symposium*, not only did Socrates get his view of what has since been called Platonic love from her – saying that the “beauty of the mind is more honourable than the beauty of the outward form” and that the highest love is the love of beauty itself (210 b–d) – the very idea of a theory of forms seems also to be contained in her teachings,² as well as the Socratic method itself!³

The method he seems to have learned from Diotima is a *dialectic* or *discursive method*, that is, a way of finding the truth by methodically discussing different points of view by posing questions. This method in turn comes in different forms. In the *maieutic method* Socrates' questions allegedly just help the interlocutor to realize what he knew all along; Socrates helps to deliver the insights that come from the interlocutor himself. A case in point is the cited passage in *Meno* where Socrates helps the slave comprehending the Pythagorean theorem (or at least a special case of it). In the *elenctic method*, on the other hand, Socrates either refutes the interlocutor by showing that the falsity of what he says is entailed by some further premises that both Socrates and the interlocutor agree upon,⁴ or shows only that the interlocutor has proved himself to be wrong against the background of the premises that he but not necessarily Socrates commits himself to. This last variant of *elenchus* only demonstrates that the interlocutor's position is self-contradictory.

The kind of method that will be our main interest is what can be described as a Socratic method in the *political* or *strategic* sense. Whether this is also Diotima's method is impossible to say, but the method is part and parcel of the task that Socrates considered himself to have in his society, namely the task of a provocateur who forced people to question their ingrained opinions. Here are Socrates' own words in *The Apology*:

[...] if you kill me you will not easily find a successor to me, who, if I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by God; and the state

¹ Kathleen Wider (1986, 44–49) has shown that the authenticity of Diotima is more often questioned by male scholars than by female ones (one exception is Martha Nussbaum 1979, 144–145). Whether this indicates that the male scholars underestimate her actual existence and influence or that the female ones overestimate it or that both the positions are affected by wishful thinking is not an issue here.

² See Gregory Vlastos (1991, 33).

³ Both Nussbaum (1979, 144) and Wider (1986, 44) note that Plato attributes the Socratic method to Diotima.

⁴ See Vlastos (1991).

is a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state [---] you think that you might easily strike me dead as Anytus advises, and then you would sleep on for the remainder of your lives, unless God in his care of you sent you another gadfly (30 e).

In other words, Socrates sees it as his mission to provoke and irritate in order to awake. This is not to say that provocation is not an integral part also in the dialectic method; it is, but to judge from the dialogues, not in the kind of offensive sense that is suggested in this passage from *The Apology*. Even when Socrates is very harsh in the dialogues, the interlocutor stays surprisingly calm. One of the examples where the interlocutor openly shows irritation is when Protagoras in the dialogue with his name gets tired of Socrates' pushiness:

At this point he would no longer nod assent, but was silent. And why, I said, do you neither assent nor dissent, Protagoras? Finish the argument by yourself, he said (360 d).

Here the Socratic method is counterproductive, or is at least on the point of being so, since Protagoras is about to leave Socrates' company, even if he eventually calms down and declares that he admires Socrates above all the men he has met.⁵ What this example illustrates, therefore, is more the risks that pertain to a provocative strategy than its usefulness. However, even if there is not so much irritation in the dialogues as one could expect, we have no reason to believe that Socrates underestimates his role as an irritator. Diogenes Laertius writes about Socrates: "frequently, owing to his vehemence in argument, men set upon him with their fists or tore his hair out" (II: 21).

Provocation, therefore, had two roles to fill for Socrates: A general societal role of defining Socrates' mission as a questioner of ingrained truth and a methodological role in the way he conducted this mission, that is, in his dialectic. Emotions are involved in both these roles as a motivational force: In the political role as a motivation to confront Socrates and therefore also expose oneself to his critique; and in the methodological role as a fuel in the discussion. I believe violent emotions are more likely to be counterproductive in the second role than in the first. Offending a person can be a way of getting an opportunity to talk and discuss with her; but if you continue to offend as the discussion continues you risk, just as Socrates was about to do in his discussion with Protagoras, to lose your conversational partner. That is why I believe we see a discrepancy in Socrates' *declared* provocative mission and the way he actually conducts the discussions in the dialogues. His role in society is that of a provocateur; the way he plays his role in the dialogues is more careful and smooth,⁶ even if we as spectators realize that there is often poison and irony mixed with his flattery of the

⁵ Protagoras is described as angry and heated also earlier in the dialogue in a passage where ironically Socrates is about to leave in protest at Protagoras' long-windedness (333 e). Another example of open irritation is Callicles' reaction in *Gorgias*, for example this: "This man will never cease talking nonsense. At your age, Socrates, are you not ashamed to be catching at words and chuckling over some verbal slip?" (489 b–c). Examples of annoyance: Polos in *Gorgias*, Anytus in *Meno* and Euthydemus in *Euthydemus*.

⁶ Frits Gävertsson helped me see this.

people he talks to. The spectators are to be amused whereas the interlocutor is to be kept in good humour.

The Concept of Provocation

My ambition is not to find a definition of provocation in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, since I believe that is both unnecessary and impossible. For our purpose a rough description of conceptual content and relevant distinctions will do.

The provocation I am interested in is about inciting negative feelings of the aggressive kind. I take aggression to be a wide emotional category including everything from mild irritation via indignation, anger and so on to rage and fury. But inciting negative feelings even if you do so intentionally by a statement or work of art will not be enough for provocation. If I have been cheating on my wife and she calls me a fornicator I am not a subject of a provocation even if her words hurt and upset me. I get what I expect to get and deserve and my emotions are passive and do not tend to start any other reactions in me. A successful provocation is an *active* emotional state in the one who is provoked, not a passive feeling that tends to stay with the target of the provocation. Furthermore, the provoked feelings and reactions have a moral content – they are in some way morally motivated.

As I use the concept, a statement or work of art may count as a provocation whether or not it has provocation as an actual effect. Provocation can be ascribed to the *content* of a message (that is statement or work), the *manner* in which it is delivered and the way in which it is *received*. In other words, a message may be called a provocation if it invokes aggression in a person although there is nothing provocative neither in the content of the message nor in the manner in which it is delivered. I believe this is how we understand the concept – I can make myself guilty (taken non-morally) of provocation if the very fact that I am a woman who chooses not to remain silent in my church offends other members of my congregation. Such an understanding will also be useful in a discussion of the ethics of provocation, since it seems an open question whether or not I am free to offend by what I take to be morally neutral means.

Our next question concerns whether provocation can be unintentional. It is one thing to say that I may be provocative if I speak in my church with the intention to upset my male fellow members; but do I provoke if I have no intention whatsoever to upset and not even foresee this outcome?

About the concept of blasphemy – which some might take to be a special case of provocation – Roy Perret writes:

[...] an act of blasphemy is an illocutionary act which is a function of the agent's complex intention. In the case of a blasphemous speech act, the speaker intends that the hearer should come to believe something through the recognition of the speaker's intention that the hearer do this (1987, 5).

I will not question Perret's analysis of blasphemy (although I think one could)⁷ but ask myself whether there is something in this to borrow for our analysis of provocation. If

⁷ For a discussion of the role of intention in blasphemy, see Elizabeth Burnes Coleman (2011, 76–79).

provocation is intentional, does it really require a complex intention? I would say no. I can be provoked by a message that is not addressed to me. When *Jyllands-Posten* published their infamous Muhammad cartoons in 2005, I do not believe they wanted to send a message about their intentions to the Muslim world. I do not believe they wanted Muslims to realize that they wanted to provoke them. If you want to provoke, revealing that you intend to provoke can often be counterproductive. I may calm down when I realize that the function of a controversial statement is to make me upset.

But then, does a provocation require any intentions at all, over and above what is required to make it an intentional action? Again I would say no. Imagine that *Jyllands-Posten* was unaware of the ban on images of Muhammad and that the outspoken woman in the church was ignorant of the fact that her behaviour was controversial, then the magnitude of the provocation would probably decrease. Both may try to defend themselves by claiming that they did not know that what they did was a provocation. But even so, the provoked groups may still be upset by this very ignorance. So you can provoke without any intention to do so and be provoked without believing that the one who provokes has an intention to do so. This is not to deny that the paradigmatic forms of provocation both in philosophy and art are intentional although not necessarily in the complex sense.

Provocation in Art

Anthony Fisher and Hayden Ramsay claim that “One of the principal values of much modern art is undoubtedly that it is shocking” (2000, 156). I believe this to be a consequence of the development of art as historically a cult of religion and beauty, via the romantics in the nineteenth century, who by the cult of the genius expanded the concept of beauty to include the artist himself (and it was *him*-self), on to the focus in the twentieth century on the artist and the artistic values of being avant-garde, rebellious and different. From having been a cult of beauty art in its various forms is now a cult of human creativity, at least for those people who claim to know what they are talking about when they criticize art. There was a time when the provocative creativity was directed at the critics⁸ (think of the Impressionists’ *Salon des Refusés*, the Dadaists and the early Surrealists); today the target is normally the general public.⁹ Provocative art nowadays is often anti-philistine but pro-critic; it provokes the general public with an eye on the art world.

Parallel with this shift of focus from beauty to creativity we have witnessed an increasing cultural focus on youth. Because of this we can also see in what way the contemporary artist tries to involve us all in her projects – we the philistines and the older generations are there to protest; we are part of the plan. By exposing ourselves as conservative and reactionary the artist proves to herself, the young generation and perhaps the art world that she is different. And believe it or not, I am not claiming that this is necessarily negative; but I claim it can be held against the provocative artist if this is all there is to say about her. As a creative expression of youthful rebellious spirit, provocation has a wonderful quality – just think of the early Elvis Presley, Jimi Hendrix, Nina Hagen and today’s Pussy Riot. At the surface it may

⁸ Or “art as an institution”, see Peter Bürger (1984, 22).

⁹ Defined by John A. Walker as “the majority of people who have little knowledge of art and who are not part of the minority group known as ‘the art world’” (1999, 3).

seem that the target of the Russian punk and protest band is not so much the general public as President Putin's oppressive rule and male domination; but I believe one can regard their political motivation as an integral part of the mentioned juvenile motivations. At least that is what I take punk to mean.

So one ingredient in provocation concerns morality; the reaction of the provoked is typically, or perhaps even conceptually, at least partly a moral reaction. Even when the offence just hit me personally, being or feeling provoked means that I consider myself, someone else or something else to be wronged.¹⁰ This needs not be the opinion of the provocateur – she may well provoke for what she considers to be moral reasons; she may believe she is doing what I deserve and what morality requires. Conceptually, however, I would say that morality does not necessarily enter into the *provocateur's* reasons or motivation. Quite the contrary – morality as a part of the establishment is often the very target of the provocation.

Let me therefore simplify matters and assume that we have a conflict between what the provocative artist does and what can be morally justified; can we defend it nevertheless? I shall claim that we can, provided that the provocation has aesthetic qualities.

I will not go into the question about how to define or demarcate art. Most concepts are open and the concept of art is definitely so. If we for operational reasons close it by letting the art world decide the hard cases, that is fine with me. Nothing normative follows from the mere fact that an object or performance can be called art, just as nothing normative follows from the very fact that an investigation is a piece of philosophy. Both the artist and the philosopher may well believe otherwise; but that is another thing.

The Telos in Philosophy and Art

It is somewhat easier to say what the *purpose* or *telos* of art is than to say what the essence of it is. I propose that the telos of art as art is to create aesthetic values, that is, either values of beauty or creativity. The telos of art will provide us with criteria for when art fails also from its own perspective; the essence of art will not do so. Art fails as art when it is uninteresting from an aesthetic or artistic perspective. The formula “art as art” allows for the use of art for all kinds of other purposes – personal, religious, political, philosophical (think of Sartre or Iris Murdoch), etc. But a work of art is not automatically successful as art even when it is successful in these other possible purposes. I believe there is a distinction between purpose as it is defined by the activity itself, on the one hand, and what we can make of the activity on the other. So I'm talking about the internal purpose of art (and philosophy), not the external one.

¹⁰ When Marcel Duchamp submitted his *Fountain*, signed “R. Mutt 1917”, to an exhibition organized by the Society of Independent Art, the reactions were strong and the organizers refused to exhibit it. But were these reactions *moral* reactions? I would say they were and support this with what *Tate Modern* (where one of the replicas from 1964 can be viewed) writes on their home page: “An article published at the time, which is thought to have been written by Duchamp, claimed, ‘Mr Mutt’s fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bathtub is immoral’” <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573/text-summary>. Duchamp’s *Fountain* was obviously considered to be an insult to the art world or to “art as an institution” (see footnote above).

The telos of philosophy is to discover fundamental truths and for Socrates in particular truths about how one ought to live.¹¹ Rephrased, in Socrates' case the aim of philosophy is to create moral values – to help us take care of our souls and be good people. Now, Socrates (and Plato) thought that what is good is also beautiful and that moral qualities in a person therefore are to be seen as beauty of that person's soul (see for instance *Lysis* 216 d). So for him there is no necessary conflict between the aesthetic value of beauty and the moral values. But once again, suppose we see a conflict between these values, suppose an artistically fascinating provocation is morally dubious. How do we handle the conflict?

Note that the possible existence of such a conflict does not rule out the position Berys Gaut has named *ethicism* of artistic value (2007, 10), which claims that an aesthetically relevant ethical flaw in a work is also necessarily an aesthetic flaw. I do not hold this to be a reasonable position, since I believe that the immoral quality in an artwork or performance may in itself or in combination with other qualities be precisely what creates the aesthetic value. I would say that the beauty in the short love affair between the photographer and the housewife in *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995) is in part created by the fact that she is married. Also when we believe that what they do cannot be morally justified, we are fascinated by the beauty of it. Talking about the creative value, I would say that the immoral quality plays a similar role for example in punk music and graffiti. Punk would not have been so fascinating if it did not breach moral barriers, and graffiti on a legal wall is, one might argue, less aesthetically interesting. The destructive element is part of the aesthetics of graffiti; that it cannot be morally justified is part of its aesthetic justification.

However, even if I am wrong here and even if the moral quality of a work when aesthetically relevant *is* synchronized with the aesthetic one, this will not exclude the possibility that the work can be justified on moral grounds, if the work has other positive moral qualities that outweigh the negative ones. But then, suppose it has not, does it then have to be condemned?

Richard Hare (1981, 55f) has argued that morality per definition overrides all other value domains. According to Hare it is part of what it means to be a moral value or reason that it outweighs an aesthetic one. This is a problematic claim. First, if it means that moral values for conceptual reasons are lexically prior to all other kinds of values, I simply do not think it to be true. Morality is not inherently that absolutistic – if I can save da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* by cheating a person and claim that I am willing to pay the moral price for this, I have not necessarily misunderstood what morality is about. Second, even a moderate version of

¹¹ I would say that the internal purpose of art is the creation of aesthetic value even when art, just like philosophy, aims at truth. The work of the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, for instance, is said to be reflections on different aspects of Marx's economic theory (see for example *160 cm Line Tattooed on Four People* 2000; pointed out to me by an anonymous reviewer). But even so, it aims just precisely at *reflecting, showing, displaying, exposing* etc. an economic truth about reality, and it will not be judged primarily by the value of the supposed truth displayed but by the method and manner in which it is displayed. So the method of reflecting, showing etc. is always, or at least typically, part of the artistic purpose, whether or not the artist also aims at truth. To my mind, this is also made clear in the critical writings on Sierra, for instance when Claire Bishop writes: "The tasks that Sierra requires of his collaborators – which are invariably useless, physically demanding, and on occasion leave permanent scars – are seen as amplifications of the status quo in order to expose its ready abuse of those who will do even the most humiliating or pointless job in return for money" (2004, 71). The work of Sierra "involves the literal setting-up of relations among people" (2004, 70) in order to *expose* an economic fact, and will if I'm correct be judged by the artistic qualities of *how* this is done.

overridingness – saying that moral reasons claim precedence over all other kinds of reasons of the same magnitude – will be controversial: what if the other domains make similar claims? From the aesthetic perspective the aesthetic reason may well take precedence over the moral one, and what prevents you from taking that perspective? Of course, morality tries to do so (when the competing reasons have the same magnitude) but we have no reason to believe that this fact is relevant if you are not prepared to take the moral perspective. For these reasons we may conclude preliminarily that there seems to be a relativism of reasons and values as far as the domains (morality, aesthetics and perhaps also prudence) are concerned. There is probably no neutral way of weighing moral and aesthetic reasons against each other. To go for morality or aesthetics is up to you; it's an existential choice of yours.

The exact nature of this relativism – if it has an exact nature – is not important here. We are probably talking about soft relativism, in which the different perspectives normally retain some sensitivity to each other. Morality has some importance also from the aesthetic perspective; but the nature of this importance cannot be explained in terms that are common for both domains. There seems to be no rational way, in other words, to decide on how to compare moral and aesthetic values and disvalues. Think about the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan – is there a sensible way of comparing that aesthetic and cultural perpetration with the Talibans' killing of innocent people in Afghanistan during 2001? And honestly, is it self-evident that the killings were a greater disaster than the destruction of the Buddhas? If it is, why are the destroyed Buddhas harder to erase from our collective memory than the killings?

However, relativism *between* the domains does not imply relativism also *in* the domains. What makes an aesthetically successful provocation is not up to the artist herself to determine; and what makes a morally successful provocative strategy is not up to Socrates to determine. Success in both these domains requires the realization of domain specific values. The main difference between the success criteria in the different domains, I would say, is that successful provocation in philosophy depends on the instrumental qualities of the provocation (in realizing the moral values) whereas in the arts it depends on the intrinsic or non-instrumental qualities (in being artistically fascinating). This is once again not to say that the intrinsic qualities of a provocative performance have no role to play in philosophy or that the instrumental ones play no role in the arts. Plato's dialogues are great literature and Socrates' way of being has an intrinsic value as part of the dialogues as literature (and the fact that it has such an intrinsic literary value will also be instrumentally valuable if it motivates the reader to ponder on moral questions). Similarly, I am convinced that Pussy Riot's performances have had a political effect and therefore that they have been instrumentally successful; but in order for them to be artistically successful that is not enough. They have to fascinate in their own right. In Pussy Riot's case I would say we see these intrinsic qualities (at least *I* think I can see them): they exemplify many of the central values in modern arts. There is a youthful energy and cocky fearlessness in what they do; they are "unconstrained and vitally alive" and therefore have the qualities that Donald Kuspit (1998, 292) claims motivate a good deal of modern or contemporary art.

Conclusion and Two Swedish Examples

So the instrumental qualities determine the success of provocation in philosophy whereas the intrinsic qualities do so in the arts. Had Socrates been less careful in his provocations he might have scared off his conversational partners, which he was on the verge of doing when discussing with Protagoras (and which he surprisingly did not succeed in doing with all those who were almost forced into intellectual submission by Socrates in the dialogues). But somehow Socrates manages to convince these people that he is just seeking after truth and that he finds just as much pleasure in being refuted (even if it happens very seldom) as in refuting (see for example *Gorgias* 358 a).

What an intrinsic quality of an art work or a performance is, can sometimes be tricky to determine, since the way we experience the quality also depends on the actual outcome. The daringness in a provocative performance is less conspicuous if nobody gets provoked; the punkishness of Pussy Riot's performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour 2012 would have failed if no one had reacted, and so on. But in these cases there is an intrinsic quality in the very performance, even if it cannot be isolated and even if it depends on external effects. This is obvious when we talk about the artistic values – the originality in a work does not depend on what effects it has but it may stand and fall on being the first of its kind; the emotional expressiveness in a painting does not consist in the way it is emotionally received by the audience, but would hardly be there without any such reception taking place. I believe this is true also of such affective aesthetic qualities as being deeply moving, exciting or boring, and so on. These qualities are conceptually linked to the subjective responses they bring forth (cf. Gaut 2007, 27), but it is still in virtue of a work's intrinsic qualities that it is experienced as moving, exciting or boring. Therefore, it is in virtue of Pussy Riot's performances that they are considered rebellious and fearless even when it is the effects of their performances in terms of exposing the oppressive rule in today's Russia that explain why we concern ourselves with them as a phenomenon.

There does not exist an exact typology of aesthetic qualities, just as it does not exist exact criteria for when they are present. I have made a rough division between qualities of beauty on the one hand and artistry or creativity on the other. In the two examples of provocation from the art world that I will finish with, I will humbly suggest that the first example can be characterized by the presence in it of the first kind of qualities, that is, qualities of beauty, whereas the second by the absence of the second kind of qualities, that is, the absence of creativity:

First Example: The exhibition *Ecce Homo* by the photographer Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin in Uppsala Cathedral 1998.¹² Her pictures have a beauty and sensitivity. Jesus is sexualized and presented as a homosexual. This may seem far-fetched, but would we have understood his teachings if we could not accept this as a possibility?

Second Example: The conceptual artist Lars Vilks' drawing of Muhammad as a roundabout dog 2007.¹³ The publication resulted in a fatwa on the artist, which of

¹² See for instance <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/avsnitt/76057?programid=2946>

¹³ See for instance <http://www.vilks.net/2007/07/21/mot-framtiden-konstens-granser/>

course is unjustifiable. But so is also, I suggest, the publication. The idea behind Vilks' drawings seems close to the idea behind the cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten* and the lesson from that publication should have been that a reiteration of the same thing would be foolhardy rather than brave. The lack of, to say the least, support in the prophet's own teachings means that there is no such quality in the work either.

So, in Ohlson Vallin's work I would say we have a presence of qualities of beauty whereas in the second example we have a lack of qualities of artistry and creativity. Vilks' installations *Nimis* and *Arx* at Kullaberg in southern Sweden are both beautiful and profoundly creative; but his roundabout dog is none of this, in my opinion.

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