



The Visual Sense and the Power of Art

Dr. Daniel Shorkend*

Technion Institute of Technology, Israel

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*Corresponding Author: Dr. Daniel Shorkend

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INTRODUCTION

The visual arts or simply, art is a visual experience. In this paper, I will outline based on a phenomenological approach, what it means to truly experience art mediated as it is by the visual apparatus and which in turn confers a certain body-orientation. This “orientation” is what then fuels an inner experience, that is to say emotions and flights of thought or ideas. To the extent one is visually engaged both as practitioner and viewer, so one’s experience quo the work of art is heightened. In the first part of the paper, I will model an ideal embrace of the eye as an organ of and in the body in seeing art proper. Then I will see what criticism may be levelled at such a thesis. In the last part of this essay, I will take into account such criticism and propose a more accurate model using examples culled from the history of art. The implication of such an approach is to see art both as biological/physiological as well as a psychodynamic and philosophical project. Moreover, such an approach suggests a more unified vision of art rather than the warped Cartesian dualism toward a more integrated and holistic approach to persons and to aesthetic awareness or experience in general.

PART 1: DEFINING OUR TERMS

1) The power of sight

Sight is a special ability. Unlike the ability to hear and discern meaning in words or a musical piece, it does not require time in order to process. That is to say, when we see something it is immediate and all-encompassing. Certainly, one might need time to focus on a detail, but essentially it is an immediate sensation. It is akin therefore to a revelation, a sudden input (and output) of light and *Walla*, one can see something in front of one’s field of vision – a sudden epiphany if you will.

Now, the purpose of this essay is not to give an account of how it is that the eye can take in, as it were, the information; how the optic nerve works or the function of the pupil or how the brain then receives

such information and transforms it into a “picture” of the external world in the visual processing region, the occipital lobe. Rather, let us simply record phenomenologically what happens when one sees from a purely first order experience which one probably does notice like one’s ever-present constant breathing or the surge of blood that pulses around the body.

So, it is immediate and seems to construct an external world that exists as objects within space. This precedes the naming of such objects. Sight is preverbal or non-linguistic; a visual experience where language only interferes to the extent that sight is deadened. This is where art comes into the argument. For to the extent that art offers a creative and original “object”, so one’s visual sense is excited and ignited. Only then, after this immediate and unnamed experience do we try to place the “object” using language and cultural codes in order to compare the “object” to other such “objects” within the ambit of art and for those who write about art to then find meaning in the art. Even having the concept “art” limits the experience of that visual illumination, for it constrains its effect and meaning in relation to what each viewer might have in mind by the notion of art.

For the artist, the practitioner, the constant jousting and jabbing in the creative process is a perennial search for “what looks right” and “what looks right” is a peculiar non-verbal expression that precedes very often even a concept. The artist checks and balances her painting while engaged in the creative process to find a correlating visual picture that somehow says what it is that lurks within or captures what it is believed to be in the external world or in an interesting dialogue between the inner and outer world.

2) Empathy/ Einfühlung

The idea that the world reaches out or “touches” one through our seeing it and that art is a heightened awareness of such a fact is perhaps captured by the concept of empathy.

In the course of intensive philosophical debates on aesthetics in nineteenth century Germany, Robert Vischer introduced the concept of *Einfühlung* in relation to art. Theodor Lipps subsequently extended its use from art to visual illusions and interpersonal understanding. While Lipps had regarded *Einfühlung* as basically similar to the old notion of sympathy, Edward Titchner in America believed it had a different meaning. Hence, he coined the term empathy as its translation.

This term came to be increasingly widely accepted, first in psychology and then more generally. At around this time, Vernon Lee explicated a theory of empathy in art wherein she studied body movements in relation to aesthetic form. She developed an empirical-based empathy theory of art. As she states: “is not what we call the conception of the abstract relation outside as a perception of a concrete relation inside us? The innervation of certain movement, the basis of a movement itself” (in Lanzoni 2009:330). In these terms, she develops a physiological and emotional response as vital elements for the appreciation of beauty and she conducted her experiments in gallery and museum settings in the 1890s. She showed that there is a kinesthetic of art reception that moved the body in a manner both emotional and actual.

Robert Vischer argued that such movement in art is not simply physiological but psychologically rich involving a projection of movement, bodily feeling and even the self into the object of aesthetic appreciation, an expansive ego-based immersion in the art-object. For Lee this constituted the confluence of body-mind reactions – that is, while Vischer focused more on feeling derived from, in the main, optical pleasure, Lee’s focus is on motoric response mechanisms influenced by aesthetic experience. And this bodily resonance sharpens and focuses the aesthetic repose and contributes to the general well-being – a certain “tactile sense” and “muscular sense” is involved in judging of weight, resistance, impressions of the object that are mirrored by the perceiving subject. This in turn produced a “sense of living in those who experienced it...and gives us the life-enhancing qualities of the object” (Lee in Lanzoni 2009:339). This draws from Nietzsche’s belief that art and aesthetic experience results in a heightened sense of the capacity for life – derived from that which is otherwise beyond the ordinary, everyday life. It requires imaginative projection to see from the others (or perhaps even the artist’s) projection and emphasizes in what Merleau-Ponty might describe as lived bodily experience rather than pure abstraction, of play and desire and compassion.

Yet this rare experience can be found in everyday objects and Lee uses the example of a chair and a bowl to show that we somehow intuit and perceive in the object of attention a physical (and mental) “positioning” in relation to it that is a visceral effect which may be

empirically measured so that, for example, “spatial dimensions were translations of perceptual modes bound to bodily extensions” (Anstruther-Thomson 1924:67).

Consequently, harmony and pleasure is a kind of “aesthetic instinct”, deeply rooted in the needs of the organism and leads to well-being. Worringer in 1908 in his work *Abstraction and Empathy* takes a different track to Lee. He argues that representational art is comfortable and “objectified self-enjoyment” (Worringer 1908:16), whereas abstract art thwarted the empathetic impulse producing an unease. Both abstraction and representational art, however, existed on a continuum of self-estrangement, relinquishing autonomy in absorption in the art-object; in the case of abstract art inducing emotional discomfort. For Lee, empathy was just as possible for geometric as for organic forms. One could say much of these discussions centered around the implied energy and movement of shapes and patterns particularly as abstraction began to take root. It seems that a confluence of the haptic and optic requiring the active experience of the individual spectator – and the birth of cinema heralded an emotive projection with the moving narrative and optical “visual music” akin to realistic representational art.

The waning of narrative in painting and sculpture via abstraction was perhaps fueled by the increasingly popular cinematic arts – the moving image. One can perhaps sum up the fascination for “reaching out” to the aesthetic form as the senses becoming more spiritual and the spirit more sensual. While Robert Vischer found a lexicon of such terms to express this: *Auführung* (responsive feeling), *Nachführung* (attentive feeling) and *Zuführung* (immediate feeling), it was *Einfühlung* (empathy) that inspired much discussion. It conjured a resonance between spectators (viewer, listener...) and “object” that permeated perhaps both with a sense of striving, activity, power and energetic repose.

Wolfflin held a similar view, namely that “we invest inanimate objects with inward states by analogizing between their physical shape and endowing on the other body posture and mood” (in Podro 1982: XXIV). Moreover, even verbal expression and written poetry is rooted in our ways of speaking which is based on the biological evolution of the tongue, palette, teeth, gut and thorax – we cannot separate mind and body as such. Whether this could be grounded as a universal aesthetic – described both physiologically and psychologically – is debatable, and often subsides into mere elitism. What is interesting is that the “faculties” for “sympathetic” and “empathetic” responses in humans are neurologically identical (Gladstein 1984:42) so that the sympathetic and empathetic are similar human experiences even as the former initially held sway in aesthetics. Both, however, are signs that do seem to constitute a universal language both formally and emotionally, for example, we “read” the facial

expressions on another person or his/her gestures in communication (cultural differences aside). Nevertheless, empathy (like sympathy) captures a sense of both identification with other (or the aesthetic object) and alienation (as self cannot fully know other).

3) Changing the paradigm

The tendency in art theory and history is to equate art with aspects of the mind as a form of “high culture” and thus removed from bodily experience. This is a blind spot that emanates from the strong influence of Cartesian dualism. However, art is clearly dexterous and bodily (even poetry requires a bodily feel for the sound of words). Art requires training in craft (in general) as much as it is an intellectual pursuit. Furthermore, I am in partial agreement with Shusterman’s soma esthetics, wherein all art is said to be created and perceived through the body so that we should “save art from reaching its end in philosophy, we should keep art in the area of the aesthetic” (Feng 2015: 105). Thus art is primarily concerned with the living, moving, sensuous body through which we can enhance ourselves and our surroundings; it is a call to action and dialogical experimentation, rather than privileging a transcendent mind and spirit purveying from an Archimedean point of objectivity and distance.

Rather, the living body is a site for sensory appreciation (aesthesia) towards the transformative cultivation of beauty in daily life wherein, for example ordinary objects can be aesthetically appreciated with a nonverbal empathic connection, just as the artist may make use of his/her body so that it become a living material in art and technology (the performance artist Stelarc is an example of this). As forms of communication – auditory, visual and movement - they reveal a semiotic structure, which in turn leads to interpretative possibilities. The upshot of this is that art is not purely conceptual (Kant already made this point), rather it is through an awareness of the body and how that structures our sensorial perceptions (aesthesia) that gives rise to a certain aesthetic consciousness.

The aesthetic dimension resists intellectualization, as Ranciere would have it, and it is the “thought that does not think” (in McQuillan 2014:18). The focus on *soma* or the living, wondrous body and bodyliness in art immediately acts as a bridge linking art with other more common experiences in life, where the latter is clearly marked by the mobilization of the body in various ways so that art need not be separated as “high” culture, so that it becomes the preserve of “spirit” and an elite few without effecting the status quo (c.f. Marcuse, 1968). While I find some body-art crude, problematic and indulgent, I recognize the extent that “other” aesthetics or retrogressive acts may be at times a healthy purging by one extreme for another.

Art’s purported spiritual and philosophical depth is one aspect inversely related to its aesthetic and bodily

component – the matter through which the artist “thinks” and the “object” that the viewer perceives. The paradigm shift in philosophical thinking which Shusterman (2008:8) neatly describes as a “vision of an essentially situated, relational, and symbiotic self rather than the traditional concept of an autonomous self-grounded in an individual, monadic, indestructible and unchanging soul” implies that there is always some aspect of the body (or rather *soma* – the living body) in the understanding of persons and aspects of world. The dominant Platonic Christian-Cartesian tradition is thus challenged by the fact that we think and act through our bodies so that in Shusterman’s (2008:19) words: “if the body is our primordial instrument in grasping the world, then we can learn more of the world by improving the conditions and use of this instrument”.

Furthermore, it is specifically art and aesthetics as a perceptual activity by and large that may assist in developing a creative conception of living amidst others and of objects in space-time. Insofar as this can be done, where the perceptual role of aesthetics and its embodied intentionality contradicts the mind/body dichotomy, the distinction between art as “spiritual” and other seemingly non-intellectual pursuits as superficial, even hedonistic dissolves. Art and pop culture in a postmodern context and the focus on everyday aesthetics means that art is not an isolated phenomenon or insular activity (and perhaps never was either), an ontological essence impervious to fashion, economic value and other aspects of life (political, religious, ideological ...).

Moreover, as I understand it, somaesthetics perhaps drawing from Eastern philosophical thinking and practical disciplines such as Tai Chi and yoga, offer a perspective where pleasure and a more enjoyable method of basic functions such as breathing, sitting, lying, stretching, walking and eating gesture towards personal self- cultivation and sensitivity to others – wherein the “spiritual” is not reserved simply as some kind of disembodied state or the philosophical promise of “depth” that is supposed to be found in fine art in particular.

Through the “lived body” (or *soma*), the potential for an integrated awareness, a kind of conceptual non-conceptual may be reached, an ineffable quality named as such. Ranciere theorized a way to combine the conceptual and non-conceptual or conceptual non-conceptual. I agree with McQuillan (2012:14) who says reflecting on Ranciere: “The equality and even, perhaps the lack of the distinction of the sensible and the intellectual that is to be found in Ranciere’s aesthetics holds open the possibility of a more sensible intelligence and a more intelligent sensibility.” I contend that philosophers of art should do everything in their power to realize that possibility instead of indulging in the anti-intellectual fantasy of a purely sensible aesthetics becoming pervasive today.

Thus far I have been arguing that the enigmatic power of sight localized as a bodily attunement to the external world and expressed in art as a function of an empathetic relationship to “objects” and in the making of “objects” (specifically those we name art), suggests a shift away from seeing art and theorizing about art that focuses simply on meaning in intellectual terms. A good artwork “hits” one; theorizing comes as an after-effect, just as the creative act is a perceptual, gestural, expressive one not simply grounded in analytical thinking. This is not denying “depth” or meaning, only to balance and harmonize the biological with or rather through which thought (and language) may emerge. This may be otherwise stated with Zeki’s (2001) contention that certain abstract artists are engaged in a kind of applied neurasthenics.

Having said this, there are shortcomings to this paradigm shift, and I shall now look at some criticism which may arise.

PART 2: CRITICISM

There are a number of criticisms that may be levelled at the idea that the repour between embodied perceptual experience and the artwork quo “object” is an explanatory paradigm to the making and viewing of such art. I shall look at these problems one by one.

a) Blindness

If one is ascribing sight, visual perception as the key idea embedded in the experiencing of art, what of the case of the blind? Do such persons have no concept of art? Is art only available to the sighted?

If one would maintain as such, then a whole region of aesthetic delight and pleasure is lost on the blind. Yet what is art? Is art simply an appreciation of shapes and lines and colours and so on which give rise to aesthetic pleasure or the manipulation of such elements to create a “picture” and thus precluding from such experiences those who happen to be blind. Yet this is surely not the case. Art is a concept. When Duchamp submitted his famous “urinal” within the context of art, he was making the point that art is not a particular kind of thing but rather exists as an idea, neither perceptual as such nor simply concerned with the outward show of accepted standards and definitions of beauty. If this is the case, a blind person could come to appreciate art as a concept whose function it is to ignite philosophical and metaphorical thinking. So, I could explain to a blind person the various kinds of art and its evolution over time in order to convey a conceptual idea. You retort and say, but even with the aid of description the lack of “picturing”, the lack of the gestalt of say “redness” and so on is lost on the blind and so he may never know what art and aesthetic experience is.

Yet there are two major errors in this view. Firstly, I maintain that even without the modality of sight, a blind

person can be creative and even make good art, whatever that may mean. Secondly, there are degrees of blindness, but for the sake of argument the totally blind may yet “see” something and recent research has revealed that, at least in some cases, even the totally blind might be able to perceive light non-visually. In some respects, there is illumination and certainly and ever living person with feelings and thoughts that may give rise to creative art-making, yet one might have to submit that it would be difficult for the blind to understand art as history and thence theory without the faculty of seeing the plethora of art past and present. In any event, the point is that some aesthetic awareness and even agility is possible for those who cannot see and conversely those that are sighted, the great majority, may not see in the full sense we mean – that is with aesthetic sensitivity and awe in the presence of the perceptual world.

b) Conceptual Art

The art that became defined as conceptual often relegates the “pretty picture syndrome” in favour of intellectual and philosophical rigor with more or less little patience that the artwork conforms to aesthetic qualities or rather that its meaning does not reside in the use of the elements of art *per se* or an antiquated notion of beauty, but rather art is defined as idea, an imperceptible thought that only happens to have visibility like the arbitrary letters of a quadratic equation. It is the thought expressed that is key, rather than that which can be perceived.

While conceptual art may have given way to installation and even performance art which are readily and emphatically perceptually strong, the primary notion that the art is in the idea is enduring and neither skill, technique nor traditional concepts of what art ought to look like, hold sway. In Kosuth’s “One and three chairs” for example, he is simply expressing the idea that a concept say of a “Chair” can be presented in different forms – as photograph, as dictionary definition or as the chair itself. It is not the intention of the artist that one ought to stare “googyeyed” and the work and exclaim its beauty and craftsmanship. It is the philosophical concept that just like Plato’s notion of the Forms is such that this world is a pale reflection of an ideal realm, so our concept of a thing, in this case a “chair” might be variously instantiated, used, understood and defined, yet at the same time in its multiple “presence”, it is absent and a second or third order remove from the ideal realm of objects, the true and enduring “chair”, which exists beyond the perceptual within our world, perhaps somewhere in the realm that Plato so designated. It is to this idea that we refer to as the real art, and

not what we simply see with physical eyes. Consequently, the aesthetic is not the primary modality and purpose of art. Art of the past is now usurped in its childish adherence to standards of beauty.

The fact that we call such art and similar art of its kind “conceptual” neatly packages and tames such art form being the very definition of art and “saves” as it were past art and the tradition of say painting and sculpture and so on, so that it merely becomes one of many forms or types of art. Irrespective, it is a powerful example of how art is not simply found in aesthetic delight and the “cult” the “pretty picture”. This also somewhat devalues my emphasis on embodiment at the core in the experience of art, preferring the philosophical and aloof, though conceptual arts’ transformation into installation, performance and minimalist abstract art perhaps rescues my argument. In fact, as a general counter to this criticism I would claim that even in the Kosuth example and certainly in say Judd’s “bricks” or Kapoor’s sculptural installations, the role of the “object” and physical presence is certainly brought to the fore, arguably more so than say traditional rather two-dimensional painting or traditional sculptures on plinths and the like.

c) The other Senses and the disembodied eye

The focus on the eye as the sole mediator between the self and the artwork or in the making thereof is skewed. It renders the eye somewhat disembodied and it undermines the role of all the senses in one’s experiential terrain.

In fact, on a recent trip to Paris in 2019 at the Pompidou Centre for Contemporary art, there were a number of artworks, installations that relied not only on seeing colour, line, shape, form, composition and the like, but also urged the viewer to smell, to move in and around the artwork and even to touch and fondle. and some to the accompaniment of music. The disproportionate attention to the eye as purveyor of all, as the single most important sense is overturned and perhaps this is more accurate; accurate in the sense that one’s life experience is a conglomerate of different sensorial apparatus and singling out the eye presupposes a paradigm wherein light and illumination – that which is associated with the eye and seeing as a further metaphor for understanding and the abstract – is not in concord with the full bodily immersion of self within the world, where just like other animals, we obtain as breathing, digesting, spitting, electro-chemical beings whose activity is only to a degree based around visual perception.

d) Formalism

The emphasis on visual perception in art falls to the same critique that one might level at formalism. Formalism, defined as the preoccupation in the arts with the form as such and usually first ascribed to Kant and later developed by Bell, Greenberg and others, is said to eschew the political dimension or more accurately, the ideological. Whose aesthetic is the better question, that is in relation to whose paradigm? The historic definitions of beauty and art are thus not universal, though theoreticians and philosophers in their iconoclastic musings thought their ideas to represent universal and cosmic truths, are in the post-historical, postmodern discourse nothing more than reflections of either the writers’ own psychology, history and biases or in the more grand sense, simply a reflection of norms and standards of his culture as a whole. Thus, art and what is accepted as good art and so on tells us more about the biases and instabilities of a particular culture and society, rather than the truth about beauty or the definition of good art or some bodily, aesthetic delight. The result is often a devastating political power-mongering and hegemony of certain ideas, privileging some and excluding others, what I call its “muscular aesthetics”. Consequently, hiding behind the idea of formal beauty and “pure form” is nothing more than a pretense of ideological indifference.

There are numerous problems with a formalist theoretical viewpoint. I will cite some areas of concern in what follows: In the case of Bell’s version of formalism, we may note that he never really explains what sort of forms count as significant. His examples are restricted, and we are left wondering about formal significance; we are also bound to ask, “Significant of what”? Bell does maintain that in seeing “pure” form, the artist glimpses “ultimate reality”, but again such descriptions are mysterious, relying on intuition rather than reason.

Formalism seems to extol when an artwork “works”, but fails to explain why this is so, other than by enumerating further formal components of the work. Thus, art’s apparent “depth” may not be forthcoming. Another problem with simply equating appropriate form with the aesthetic or aesthetic emotion and so on is that such experiences may be wider than that of art, and in fact after Duchamp’s ready-mades (1914 onwards), we could say anything could potentially be aesthetic, since it could be art and formally arresting. That the aesthetic attitude is sometimes referred to as being a distinctive mode of consciousness is not necessarily true as a particular way of perceiving something, as Stolnitz (in Arnold 1990:161) observes, anything can be an object thereof and such a “state” need not be confined to the visual, but to taste, touch, sound, smell and the kinesthetic. The taste of wine, the touch of silk, the sound of music, the smell of fresh cut hay, the feel of a tennis serve and the motion of scything, for example, are all possible aesthetic “objects” and are all capable of

yielding aesthetic satisfaction and bodily excitement. Therefore, an aesthetic object may or may not be art and art need not be aesthetic.

If this is so, it is difficult to locate the meaning of a peculiarly “disinterested” formalist, aesthetic experience. A further problem is that since formalism is a-political, perhaps it causes “insidious erasures” (Dillon 1997:3). In trying to omit the political from aesthetic discourse, there is often an attempt to argue in favour of a kind of universalism, resulting in “fashioning subjects and discursive forces in uniform shapes without regard for political and historical specificity”.

Another trajectory to take as a critique is simply by noting the different varieties of art that proliferated post 1960's: video, performance, photography, body art, earth art and conceptual art so that the Modernist notion of steady and measurable development within a given medium was increasingly irrelevant (Dillon 1997:64). We can therefore say that Greenberg who extols the “purity of the medium” omits social and existential concerns. As such the art critic is neither antagonistic nor threatening to dominant ideologies: “its advocacy of a radicalized and artistic autonomy and purity obviated any implication for social critique” (Tekiner 2006: 34), under the banner of “art for art's sake”, the social import or ramifications of art were undermined.

In fact, Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) wrote extensively on art's role as a “dialectical revelation of harmonized oppositions” (in Tekiner 2006:32) and Greenberg skirts over Mondrian's theoretical intentions and merely says “he has theories” (Greenberg 1971:64). As such, Greenberg disregards Mondrian's idea of content, a typical formalist strategy. Of Kandinsky (1866–1944) too, Greenberg simply evaluated such works only in terms of formal properties. Therefore “if he acknowledged content at all, he gives short shrift, dismissing a priori as not pertinent to the value of art” (Tekiner 2006: 32). However, modern art is littered with explanatory literature and statements by artists (and I would suggest erroneously ignored), instances of obvious extra-aesthetic concerns. When Newman (1905–1977) says of his art that it ought to be “a carrier of awesome feelings ... felt before the terror of the unknowable” (Newman in Arnold 1990:108), Greenberg surely cannot only refer to formal properties; there must be a metaphysical allusion. Tekiner (2006:33) thus says that “Greenberg and the Formalists took full avail of abstract expressionisms susceptibility of misunderstanding”. Newman himself fought formalist criticism of his work and in 1963 refused to participate in the show entitled “the formalists” and claimed that such a description or category is “a distortion of meaning of my work” (Newman in Arnold 1990:221).

He opposes that the art object is merely a fetish and ornament, and emphatically remarks that “the fetish and

the ornament, blind and mute, impress only those who cannot look at the terror of the self. The self, terrible and constant, is for me the subject matter of painting and sculpture “ (Newman in Arnold 1990:187). A purely formal approach would appear to miss the mark so far as such content is concerned, been solely about the dissonance or aesthetic resonance of shapes, colours and lines, while oblivious to its construction of a particular meaning. The work may contain important ideas, an emotional expressiveness, even accuracy of representation, and insight. One could say that formalism is historically linked and even locked within the very particular confines of a modernist impulse.

As a result, one might make the claim that a postmodern “era” beginning with pop art with its repetition, quoting, inclusion of mass images and materials and moving on to Conceptual art with its dematerialization of the art object, a focus on questioning art and redefining it, the fusing of various processes and media are an affront to formalism and the concomitant notion of an aesthetic disposition, and therefore modernist tenets such as ontology, teleology and the centred artist, the intentional “origin” that is the artist, are no longer all together sound.

In fact, in terms of ontology and the notion of a “disinterested” contemplation of the art object, we find that writers as early as Nietzsche (1844–1900) [1956]), predating formalist/modernist theory as such, lend further weight to counter the argument that art consists in this “disinterested” state of mind. He asks: “...what does all art do? Does it not praise? Glorify? Choose? Prefer? With this it strengthens or weakens certain valuations ... art is the great stimulus to life; how could one understand it as purposeless, as aimless, as *l'art pour l'art*” (in Kemal & Gaskett 1998:3). I think this is a strong point. It breaks down the iconoclastic distinction between art and “everyday” life and it refuses to regard the recipient of art as but a passive and/or contemplative viewer or listener. Given that art and life may be indissolubly linked, it has moral or political and social import, while the individual, according to Nietzsche (in Lamarque & Olsen 2004:266) “...has our highest dignity in our significance as works of art – for it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified”. As an “aesthetic phenomenon”, the individual and social realm is a matter of negotiating reality, not simply hanging it on a wall. As Nietzsche (1956:15) writes: “all our cognitive activity, including the abstracting and generalizing tendencies, are profoundly practical – ways in which we try to master the world and to make ourselves secure in it”. Thus, for Nietzsche, art is not detached from life and “disinterested”; art is for life's sake. As the art object loses significance and therefore formalist-type analysis, the viewer is transformed to that of a thinker, rather than responding to formalist “visual music”; art theory itself enters the domain of art. In Conceptual art, the

artist takes over the role of the critic to frame their own propositions, ideas and concepts. This was initiated by Duchamp who says: “a certain state of affairs that I am particularly anxious to clarify is that the choice of these ready-mades was never dictated by any aesthetic delectation. Such choice was always based on a reflection of visual indifference and at the same time total absence of good taste” (Duchamp in Meyer 1972:IX). This opposes the view that art is simply an ornament, an aesthetic object and rejects the myth of the precious and stylish object d’art, a commodity for the benefit of museums and status seekers. Duchamp’s and later the Conceptualists’ interest turned from the tradition of painting to the challenge of invention.

PART 3: AESTHETIC AND EXTRA-AESTHETIC – THE POWER OF ART

In part 1 I argued in favour of the enigmatic experience in the presence of an artwork and in the creation thereof, and localized in and through the body, primarily mediated by the eye. I argued that this requires a paradigm shift wherein aesthetic experience thus ought to be seen as not simply an intellectual and analytical project, but one through which the embodied self-experiences the object and that this is rooted biologically and not simply as a cultural and social discourse.

I then problematized such a definition of aesthetic experience, noting that it falls to the same critique leveled at formalism. In addition, art from the latter half of last century and onwards, such as Conceptual art seems to defy the “hungry eye” and the importance of presence and the body, while noting much contemporary art emphasizes all the senses and does not privilege the eye as it were and therefore even the blind may have access to art and aesthetic experience thereof.

In this part of the paper, I will argue that in fact one can combine the paradigm shift outlined in the first part and take into account the criticism that followed with an approach that recognizes both the role of the body and consciousness with the external world and the experience of art. In the process, dualities dissolve and even the notion of reality (ie. As that which exists apart from self or as a mind that is separate from the body) is a misnomer and probably a consequence of the limitations of language and the rigidity of words (i.e. word “A” only has sense since it is “not B” and so on). Thereafter, we will be in a position to derive some conclusions.

Kant made the distinction between what he called the noumenal – Reality as it truly is – and the phenomenal – reality as we perceive it. In so doing, he made the point that our consciousness and brain is hard-wired to perceive, apprehend and conceptualize the world in a predetermined and particular way. This could be seen as a kind of philosophical precursor to modern

neuroscience as it describes how the brain operates and thence come to know and act in the world.

Yet, there is a curious thing that the mind in doing say mathematic for example can predict what is actually “out there” just like how, for example pure math predicted the existence of a real substance, for example the Higgs boson. Accordingly, it is not just consciousness that is reflected back upon man when one sees the world or the universe, but the actual reality as such. However, logic itself is determined by the nature of the human brain and various cultures impinge upon one a certain world-view and logic, for example some cultures may not have the same numbering system and the like. In fact, Einstein himself said: “As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality.” Thus, human knowledge is just that and Reality is elusive.

Such notions when applied to art may mean that the experience of art and aesthetics is not of a being seeing art as if looking through a window on a transparent reality, but as certain kind of energy transference perceiving self and the energy of that which apparently lies beyond one: it is body in relation to body and through which consciousness acting in both directions are shared. Just as the brain impels the body to move and the movement itself inspires the brain and further activation. Similarly, there are laws in nature (“the brain” as it were) and the plenitude of nature that “moves” in accord. Since we may never know the ultimate laws or how the brain truly functions, nature itself is a mystery, just as one might interpret art in a multitude of ways.

Another way of saying this is that the aesthetic and the medium of the body is inversely related to the extra-aesthetic, that is abstract thought, interpretation, the discipline of art history or science or whatever. That is, to the extent that one focuses on the delight of the senses, one cannot so analyze. And conversely, to the extent that in is engaged in analyzing, one forgoes on the senses. Both however obtain though one cannot focus on them simultaneously and one can like this to the strange nature of light that is both a wave and a particle.

The implication in art is that one can view artwork purely as aesthetic delight and find joy in the presence of the creation thereof and only then find the words appropriate to describe, analyze and interpret. Or one may conceptualize and then be engaged in response by making something or seeing it represented through other things, as bodies. There is no consciousness without stuff and no stuff without consciousness.

In addition, such a separation means that all such interpretation and analysis is not tied to the body, the object, the artwork as truth – it is merely cultural

discourse and arbitrary. The thing cannot be known and accounted for. Such a realization acts as buffer to a sense of overarching discourse and ideology where a thing is said to be or mean x; where symbols take hold of consciousness; motivate behavior, adherence and blind following – a disastrous equivocation of the aesthetic and extra-aesthetic and often the call to arms and war. The result is as what Kant calls in his understanding of art in the Third Critique, “the free play of the imagination” and in this free play signs can be played with; signs lose their functional play in a game which may be dangerous. When the body and consciousness are so related, then creativity and imagination is allowed free reign., on the other hand, this liberal approach is held in check for there can be a common discourse and understanding in the sense that the body to which one refers, say an artwork/object is relatively stable and there are at least some terminology and history that is also stable and true and so communication across and within the boundaries of culture can take place. Only certainty is a word used with great caution. If infinity is the best approximate word one has to describe reality both as an aesthetic “thing” in the world and as it is an instantiation of consciousness or mind, then one cannot have a final word, a finite simplification.

In these terms, the history of art might look like a terrain where each “period style” or each individual artist or the theoretical substrate of the discipline is fixed, fixed with representative images; with a certain set of facts that constitute biography, historical context; cultural context; overarching period politics, philosophy, religious world-view and even what is usually considered of periphery importance – say fashion or sports or food or technologies of the day and so on – and yet this is turned upside down, For consciousness of the now tries to create an order of the past, while itself embroiled in such aspects of life in the very moment. Knowledge then is not fixed; one’s own culture renders one no more objective than a archeologist trying to understand the past, while suffering from depression or sexual inhibitions. There are too many variables for a true picture to emerge and even though art would appear a static and eternal picture, an object that calls to be known, understood and aesthetically delighted in its presence in relation to one’s own body-mind and the passage of time, unveils any possibility. In other words, if a thing can mean anything than it could also mean nothing. Reality is indeed terrifying and that is why the object and embodied being is terrifying, mysterious and exhilarating. At least that is how I see it.

One further point: Say one looks at what has been dubbed “high renaissance art” and one analyses the various works of art that are said to represent its high point, one assumes that the past is some static thing and that one is so engaged like an archeologist in divining the past. Yet, this may not be true. The object of one’s

study is no longer. One can find records and try to understand the “mind set” of the people of the time or indeed the artist, but that is like a mere trace, a fossil of which one has a few small bones, let alone an alive human being or a bustling city or a world on the move.

CONCLUSION

Thought experiment 1: Imagine coming to a completely new country where when one can neither read nor speak the native tongue. So that when looking at the script one just sees squiggles and dashes, lines and curves with no definite meaning. Without learning the language, such a script remains a chaotic jumble that does not read as a language.

A second thought-experiment: Now imagine that one learnt nothing of the history and theory of art and had never been to a gallery and the like. In that case, if one saw anything say “x” one would not be able to so-name it and declare it “art” or call it an instance of “installation art” for example. Without the concept of art, can one experience art in a conscious way?

Yet, this essay purports two things. Firstly, in the sheer “rush of the eye” and embodied being amongst other things, one can be excited by this curious language (thought experiment 1) without knowing its meaning - purely perceptually. In the second case, one might not know what art is, but again one can be curious about this strange and new object or this place that you may learn later is called a “museum” or “gallery”. Just as our forebears may have encountered a new animal or new terrain and then began to explore and gain knowledge of it and so.

Given this, the power of art is precisely the magical presence of being in the world preceding understanding. Or the other way around, our conceptual lens say of a language one knows or the concept of art frames the way we see. Either way, the power of art is present and alive, and it is a strange confluence and admixture of consciousness and aesthetics, the surface of things, the body, the vehicle through which something *is*. This is the way one can describe such an idea within language and it always appears that one still falls into dualistic trappings, in this case between what I have called consciousness or conceptual lens and “thing” or aesthetic substance. The truth is they are indissolubly one and such a notion while escaping language or description need not be lost as a power as an idea. And the power of art lies precisely as a visual (sensory) *and* non-verbal activity which is closer to an appreciation of that oneness.

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