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The dialectical oscillation between aesthetic and extra-aesthetic modalities: Reading art as two states

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Abstract

This is a brief speculative paper that introduces a model for viewing art. Based on this model, various observations can be made and applied to an analysis of art. It also provides a paradigm through which an inter-disciplinary framework may be envisaged. The upshot, should such a view be accepted, is a more holistic appraisal of knowledge where even the sciences and humanities may overlap.

Keywords: Art; aesthetics; inter-disciplinary

1. Introduction

The triumphant work of Immanuel Kant's Third critique is owing to the connection between aesthetic experience and the formal qualities of the work of art. That this state is a specific sensibility or faculty, the so named "disinterested" attention to the work of art. While formalism, emanating as it does from Kant, has been critiqued, I think it cannot be ignored as an integral part of the characterization of an artwork as eliciting aesthetic states of consciousness via such formal qualities (and quantities).

Nevertheless, my argument is that one ought to incorporate a moderate aesthetics (c.f. Zangwill) which includes sensory awareness of formal properties and extra-aesthetic, abstract, conceptual, and metaphorical meanings. Kant in fact alluded to this in his saying that the perception of artworks may give rise to the creative dynamic between imagination and understanding and the power of art to elicit "kindred associations".

1.1. The Paradigm or Model

So, our model of art is quite simple: On the one hand there is the potential for sensory delight, an actual enjoyment of what has been termed beauty, though today such an assumption is not the currency. One might rather simply say that artworks speak through our sensory apprehension of them. Galleries and museums operate on the very pretext that what the viewer will perceive is a sort of "heightened perception". It is no surprise that much contemporary art deals with multi-sensory experiences, abject art and even a more ephemeral conceptual art (where sensory absence may itself be a kind of sense, if only one of depredation).

On the other hand, artworks are interesting precisely because the formal content gives rise to "kindred associations". These are the abstract meanings and feelings. This has variously been called "content", "subject", "iconography". In the history of art this is often developed through emphasizing contextual information – the philosophical paradigm of the day; history; politics; religion; technology; autobiographical forays into the psychology and experiences of the artist and so on.

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Now, according to this model or paradigm, it is the very creative oscillation between aesthetic effects and extra-aesthetic meanings that give the art its potency, an experience common to creator and participant (viewer; theorist; museum, biennales, events, and gallery infrastructure...) alike. To the extent, therefore that if there is no creative oscillation – the two states are disrupted or choked – then aesthetic effects and extra-aesthetic meanings cease to flow.

Of course, this begs the question “what is art?”, since surely not all art and expression ought to elicit such a dynamic effect. This also begs the question as to the objectivity of the narrative of art which claims the high point of such a dynamic. It also argues that what initially was not thought to be good art or even art for that matter, often came to be part of the narrative of such an (art) history. Nevertheless, for there to be credibility in art, one ought to say what is an “error” or bad art. Yet this is difficult to define. Even in the very genesis of art theorizing in the form of Plato, he defines only certain types of art as worthy of a State and it is not particularly inclusive. However, such will not be our concern. I will analyze an accepted masterpiece in terms of the dual-state system and then having done so, discuss and conclude the implications of such a model or paradigm, even venturing into the empirical sciences as a methodology that might prove the saliency of this theoretical formulation, as an actual mechanism in nature (the brain) itself.

2. Material and methods

Pollocks “Autumn Rhythm” (Number 30) (1950)

So, we begin with what is observed. There is a plethora of lines going this way and that; the lines interweave and entangle strewn in different directions with a vivid energy. We know that it was made on a large canvas, using sticks and enamel paints with the artist dancing around the surface, creating as he went along, in an “unconscious” dance that produces this network and web-like maze of lines and strings and globules of paint.

Now of course, common opinion that meaning is in the eye of the beholder, means that many people will simply consider that such a painting is a mess; chaotic; child-like; meaningless; the trivial, stupidity of modern art; hiding recognizable imagery; without order, beauty, and harmony. Nevertheless, according to at least (western) culture or canon, this is a masterpiece and the narrative that corroborates such a value judgement will now interpret these observations – sensory information – as meaning something.

One might point to the historical evolution of abstract painting that perhaps began with the Impressionists. One might allude to the psychological precariousness of the artist. One might include the argument that these kinds of work belong to the school in New York at that time, namely the Abstract Expressionist. One could argue in metaphorical terms that these forms represent the nervous system; the neuronal system; a cellular system; a cosmological phenomenon; a hidden order. code or pattern; a metaphysical concept of chaos in fractal-like pattern and symmetry and as an image of the heartbeat of existence itself and so on.

While no form can be said to correspond with a particular narrative – extra-aesthetic meanings – this precludes a dogmatic belief in the institution of art, the sacredness of art or the manipulation of art for political, cultural, and economic power. Though this is precisely what happens. In this sense – culture – art theory, history, and aesthetics – is embroiled in a cultural-political game. The extra-aesthetic is not innocent, and the poor form of the aesthetic becomes sacrosanct even its facticity or material embodiment.

This skeptical attitude – that no form is said to correspond to a particular or singular meaning – is healthy and overcomes the pre-modern paradigm where most art simply served a religious paradigm; it overcomes a purely modernist or secular paradigm which often focused on pure formal qualities in themselves, their structure and relationships and was thus said not to be about anything *per se*. It embraces a post-modern acceptance of *difference*. That is, the multifaceted palette of possible meanings; a certain indeterminacy and one that (must) also include the possibility of meaninglessness.

Allowing such creative leeway, it is conjectured that this describes the creative oscillation or dialectic between observable entities and their underlying structure, function and meaning. This is parallel to the scientific pursuit which is precisely about finding a/the corresponding connection between observable entities and theoretical structures, mathematical relationships, and other modelling systems (of understanding) or as it so forms the prevailing body of knowledge, itself subject to shift and alter in accordance with the dynamic defined as “two states”.

Pollock’s series of such “drip paintings”, is, I believe a good example of an artwork that may motivate and stimulate the “game” so described, namely the creative play between sensory and sensual effects and rational and imaginative meaning-making. Forming an integral part of the history of art therefore functions as a crucial component of such a

game, defined as it is as an example of Abstract expressionism. In its originality, it is in fact particularly well-appointed to be a part of such a “game” and will function in creative ways within the game as it evolves.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

A cursory glance at the example just provided may very well substantiate the narrative of art history, even in its coopting of the fringe, the peripheral, the anti-art polemic (in so many forms in early Modernism), the dissonant and so on. While such a narrative is what is referred to as culture, I have also acknowledged the power vested in such a structure and the discourse between those who so structure and those who do not, namely the consumer. This dichotomy of the “have’s” and the “have-nots” has a particular economic reality too, which is directly related to politics, commerce and dare I say, religion too. Thus, any given narrative does not operate in isolation, but in networks and relationships (alah Pollock’s web of drips). This undermines the purely formal and “disinterested” contemplation mentioned at the outset and thus the necessary dielectric between the formal, aesthetic potency and the concomitant cerebral or cognitive dance, to stretch the metaphor in more tactile, anthropomorphic terms.

This is in fact why Barnett Newman, also grouped within the school of Abstract Expressionists refused the purely formalist interpretation of his works – that it was just grammar or visual music – since he was also articulating a metaphysical and philosophical “proposition” in visual terms. Of course, in postmodern discourse even the author may be unconscious to his intentions or rather the fate of the object is indeterminate.

The purely formalist interpretation or an extra-aesthetic polemic where the artwork conforms to a singular meaning wedded within art history and discourse itself or in terms of any other discipline (as political, religious, psychological, mathematical, and so on...), is short-sighted. Therefore, perhaps a better approach is not to conform one’s observations and meanings in accordance with a single focus (one discipline or one framework within a single discipline), but as a confluence and dialectic between any number of disciplines, that is to say, two or more. It is on this basis, that the inter/multi and transdisciplinary is a useful method for understanding a phenomenon (an artwork, a piece of matter and so on...) and this then serves as a justification for our method where our approach is in the parallel and dialectical synergy between disciplines as seemingly disparate as the visual arts, music, philosophy, and neuroscience.

In terms of the latter discipline – neuroscience – it is out contention that we will get quantitative data and visual analogies to the very physical mechanism of the brain that operates when the creative brain is at work, foreclosing on “choking” wherein there is no flow between the two states (which in terms of art discourse is that between the aesthetic and extra-aesthetic) or a disruptive one. We believe we can measure this. The value of our approach and method and a possible outcome if we do get such empirical results is in a sense a corroboration of the theory or paradigm, namely that creative consciousness consists in a certain “flow” (c.f. Csikszentmihalyi) which if disruptive or out of sync halts the creative dynamic. This will not only add to the body of knowledge on creativity in general, wherein no clear definition or even understanding of creativity has so far been garnered, but also promises what I call an *epistemological unity*, wherein the humanities and sciences coalesce, as does the empirical, tactile reality and the theoretical or abstract.