ISSN 1230-0330

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A Functional Theory of Post-Modern Art

Abstract

This paper proposes a new functionalist way of thinking about post-modern works of art (broadly conceived) by suspending the typical expectation that works of art serve to impart aesthetic experiences. Using the theories of Rudolf Arnheim, the criterion is switched instead to experience. In this way, the typical shortcoming of functionalism is overcome while restoring what is intuitive about the theory. Thus, against standard functionalist theories that dismiss works like Duchamp's urinal or Warhol's brillo boxes, this paper affirms the ubiquity of this conception of art, which is opened up as experience, because these works enhance our experience of the world. What this revised functionalist theory assumes is that even though works of art do not provide aesthetic experiences exclusively, they are nevertheless bounded as artistic statements. But this boundedness does imply simplicity in any sense.

> "He is the greatest artist who has embodied, in the sum of his works, the greatest number of the greatest ideas."[1]

One of the obstacles to the enactment of a moderately objectivist form of aesthetic judgment is the lingering affirmation that works of a post-modern nature cannot be assimilated to normal standards of judgment. Moreover post-modern art, art that deals in allegory, paradox, irony, appropriation, is popularly seen to eschew aesthetic and any kind of formal properties. The most famous theory of post-modern art – the "art world" thesis promulgated by Arthur Danto – precisely weighs the balance of art on relational factors bestowed by the art world where formal factors can be "indiscriminable" from ordinary objects.[2] Thus, Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* are no different from real Brillo boxes; what makes them art is that they have bestowed with such a quality by the art world. More recent functionalist theories of art have reached a similar stalemate by asserting that functionalist principles still hold although there are exceptions that prove the rule. So, Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* or Duchamp's urinal may be

1 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, John Wiley and Sons, New York 1890, Vol. I, p. 12.
2 A. Danto, *The Transformation of the Commonplace*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1981.

conceived of as thought experiments that challenge but do not overthrow the rule of what is *really* art.

Yet as I shall argue these theories are unacceptable because of the great ubiquity of a general, contemporary idea of art that is actually adopted quite spontaneously in artistic practice around the globe. Duchamp and Warhol cannot be written off so easily when their strategies are fairly ubiquitous. Art produced in art schools and shown in galleries is more like Duchamp and Warhol than not. What is perhaps missed in such theories is that they overlook the fact that contemporary art is full of intelligence, thought, if not beauty or aesthetic experiences. I take it as a challenge to understand better this paradox that artists, dealers and curators still happily recognize art when no definition is possible. In trying to solve it, at the same time we can come to a better idea of the nature of art and creativity in such artistic work and indeed the role of perceptual ideas in the post-retinal age of the post-modern. In the end, I want to argue that post-modern works of art are still unified objects of contemplation but should be construed to focus on "elements of experience" not aesthetic qualities.

Working within the functionalist framework, particularly with the theories of Rudolf Arnheim, I propose to redirect the notion of function away from aesthetic experience toward creativity and thought. The key is to regard *all* art as possessing elements of human experience rather than beauty. Traditional works whose aim is beauty are then a subset of a larger category of works in which relationships of antagonism are found between the work of art and the ideas connected to it rather than the normal one of consonance found in modern and per-modern art.[3] This is a way of using psychology without reserving it exclusively for aesthetic perception, giving new meaning to the phrase the "psychology of art." It is, I believe, a unifying to contemporary discourses and reflects real practices.

The Functionalist Framework

To emphasize the need for a truly and positively embracing theory, I take two random works of art listed as critics' picks in the December 2011 issue of *Artforum*. They are chosen more or less at random, and include an installation and a video. Each is described by the author who selected the work.[4]

- Hans-Peter Feldmann, *2010 Hugo Boss Prize*, installation, 2011, Guggenheim Museum, New York; Matthew Higgs, "When, as winner of the 2010 Hugo Boss Prize, Feldmann received a slot on the Guggenheim's 2011 exhibition schedule along with a $100,000 honorarium, he elected to combine the two

3 Recently, Jonathan Gilmore has proposed a functionalist theory that denies that art has any single function. This may serve as an overall functionalist approach. My aim is more modest, simply to accommodate two approaches - that related to pre-modern and modern art and that of post-modern art; "A Functional View of Artistic Evaluation," in: *Philosophical Studies*, 155 (2011), pp. 289-305.

4 There is an obvious problem of bias in my selections. The picks include retrospectives of non-contemporary works, curated exhibitions of mixed works. I selected these at random from among those works that were individual and stand alone.

parts of the award, displaying his money in lieu of conventional artworks. One hundred thousand used one-dollar bills completely covered the gallery walls in neat, overlapping rows. What could have come across as an overly literal, even pedantic gesture turned out to be an unexpectedly melancholic and aesthetically seductive experience."[5]

- Frances Stark, *My Best Thing*; Mai Abu EIDahab, "Employing free text-to-speech animation software and Playmobil-like avatars, Stark's one-hour-and-forty-minute video visualizes the artist's ongoing anonymous chat-room romances. In this format, the conversations-ranging from the overtly sexual to the philosophical and artistic-amount to an insightful and comical look at the modalities and implications of mediated intimacy."[6]

In such post-modern work, the formal element exists like the tip of an iceberg, and submerged below the water line are much larger themes that can potentially affect us the way the Titanic was sunk well below the waterline. Feldmann's dollar bills form a regularized grid that is decorative in the gallery space; Stark's animated characters provide the trappings of a traditional narrative animation. Each of these however is a pretext to consider larger issues: money, sex and relationships.

According to perhaps the most important variety of functionalist aesthetic theory, it is not necessary to worry over post-modern works of art. First suggested by Monroe Beardsley, Nick Zangwill has put forward the idea of the "Unimportance of the Avant Garde."[7] Zangwill rightly points out that it is senseless to define art on extensional grounds, because it causes the perpetual search for "such and such works of art" that do not fit the criteria. His solution in moderate formalism is that aesthetic or formal qualities are still the determiners of art.[8] Avant garde works just happen to have no aesthetic qualities, that is, qualities that afford aesthetic experience and achieve beauty. Other non-formal aesthetic qualities dependently determine different functions, such as when a work serves well as a representation.

Zangwill takes for granted that the basic aesthetic qualities are the core of beauty, of what makes art into art. His pluralist approach is flexible yet it still would exclude those works spoken of before. The key to this exclusion lies in the idea, carried over from Monroe Beardsley, that the functional purpose of art is aesthetic pleasure. He stated formally that a work of art is "either an arrangement of conditions intended to be capable of affording an experience with marked aesthetic character or (incidentally) an arrangement belonging to a class or type of arrangement that is typically intended to have this capacity."[9]

5 M. Higgs, *Artforum* (December 2011), p. 214.

6 M. A. EIDahab, *Artforum* (December 2011), p. 216.

7 M. Beardsley, "Redefining Art," in: *The Aesthetic Point of View*, ed. M. J. Wreen, D. M. Callen, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1982, pp. 298-315; N. Zangwill, "L'irrilevanza dell'avanguardia," in: *Rivista di Estetica*, 47 (2007): 387-395.

8 N. Zangwill, "Feasible Aesthetic Formalism," in: *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 55-81.

9 M. Beardsley, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

If we exchange aesthetic experience for the "dynamics of experience" the story changes. The interesting difference between Arnheim and Beardsley (and Zangwill) is that Arnheim never believed that the purpose of art was affording aesthetic experience. "Aesthetic experience" is everywhere in life. Art instead is about thought. Arnheim was never a formal philosopher but gives a serviceable definition in *The Power of the Center*, where he write that art is:

> the ability of perceptual objects to display, through their own properties, relevant dynamics of experience.[10]

He continues that, a work of art is an artifact that contains the same properties and is intended to do so.

Arnheim's definition both shifts attention to the instrumental realization of the "dynamics of experience" and opens up the purview to found objects by beginning with "perceptual objects" and only ending with "a work of art." The separation between art and life is erased.

Art as the Dynamics of Experience

The artworld theory of Arthur Danto, the institutional theory of art of George Dickie, and standard functionalist theories are agreed that post-modern works of art are fundamentally different. In this view, the qualities deemed art-endowing or beautiful are not permanently aesthetic. But the properties that may or may not be beautiful in different contexts still have *real* dispositions, only the contexts change. Thus when Rudolf Arnheim refuses to make beauty a property but a functional element by writing – "Aesthetic beauty is the isomorphic correspondence between what is said and how it is said" – it is not deflationary.[11]

The solution I propose is to note that art has always been about thought and the dynamics of experience. If that is the case, then we should be able to make more headway with post-modern works of art by noting similar principles at work as with more traditional modernist works but perhaps with a different valence. A hint of this is provided by Arnheim, himself, even if he ultimately does not follow the thread to the end. In 1967, Arnheim saw his first Christo sculpture and wrote:

> By wrapping an armchair in sheets of plastic, tying it up with ropes, and displaying it in an art show, one transforms the object into the image of a tortured prisoner. When the aesthetic attitude is called up, it automatically turns the practical function of the object into an expressive one: the chair becomes human, the ropes are fetters, and their crisscross becomes the visual music of violence. The demonstration is no great creative achievement, but it is useful and rather upsetting.[12]

10 R. Arnheim, *The Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1988.

11 R. Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1969, p. 255.

12 R. Arnheim, notebook entry of 13 January 1967, in: *Parables of Sunlight: Observations on Psychology, the Arts and the Rest*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1989, p. 98.

Arnheim understands the metaphoric operation occurring but does not allow it to proceed very far. But our psychologist of art is intelligent enough to recognize the mechanism of metaphoric perception that takes place when faced by a wrapped chair or vespa. Here of course we are not far from the theory of relevance of Dan Sperber and the overall search for meaning that underlies the success of metaphoric language in general.[13]

Let us listen to how Arnheim generates his argument for the *The Power of the Center*, which speaks directly to the issues contained here.[14] Arnheim notes that art is about centers of visual energy and the eccentric vectors that connect them to other centers. This is the basis of art in which recognizable objects are seen, as well as non-representational art. For example, Arnheim discusses Titian's *Holy Family with a Shepherd* in the National Gallery, London, noting that communication is its dominant theme. Joseph stands at the center both mediator and protector.

The individual members of the scene are the dominant centers. They interlock on the left but exclude the shepherd on the right, who Joseph, however, guides to the holy scene. While the painting is a holy family, they are off center and so the painting is really about Joseph, the protector and guide to the epiphany. Now, Arnheim has argued that even in examples like Piet Mondrian's abstractions (or we might add by extension Giuseppe Terragni's similar apartment blocks, as argued by Peter Eisenman), there is a *boundedness* and hence such "post-modern" tactics do not overthrow the power of the center.[15]

Thus, for something to be art it has to be a *percept*, it has to be a differentiated statement. Now, we can go further with Arnheim. The universality of the scheme of centers and vectors is suggested when he wrote that,

> the interaction of the two tendencies [of centricity and eccentricity] represents a fundamental task of life. The proper ratio between the two must be found for existence in general as well as for every particular encounter between the inner and outer centers.[16]

I submit that although he finds the aesthetic result of Christo's wrapped chair limited, his analysis does point to a reconceptualization of the artist's work, in which the chair is not the canvas, so to speak, on which the artist works, but instead is the field of ideas promulgated – our relation to objects *in life* whose roles are defamiliarized. Arnheim need only shift the power of the center from the limited canvas to the larger world for this to occur. What I am saying is that Arnheim's diagrams have to be compared to those, for example, of his teacher Kurt Lewin on the life space, to handle post-modern art.

13 In a similar vein, Jennifer McMahon has argued that although art is sensory, it is always mediated by categories of experience. The aim of art is to find "intention in order" and this is closer to thinking than sensation; "The Aesthetics of Perception: Form as a Sign of Intention," in: *Essays in Philosophy*, 13 (2012), pp. 404-422.

14 R. Arnheim, *The Power…*

15 On Mondrian, see G. Schufreider, "Overpowering the Center: Three Compositions by Mondrian," in: *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 43 (1985), pp. 13-28; for Terragni, see P. Eisenman, "The Futility of Objects: Decomposition and Processed of Differentiation (Difference)," in: *Harvard Architecture Review*, 3 (Winter 1984), pp. 64-82. For Arnheim's response, see "The Center Surviving Mondrian," in: *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 44 (1986), pp. 292-293.

16 R. Arnheim, *The Power…*, p. 2.

At that point, Christo's sculpture becomes about much more than wrapped furniture but in fact a metaphoric transposition of an object like a person, and once we see the chair as a person, they too are tied up. An object that can be deprived of life must be living and so we have the life of objects expressed here. This move from object-as-expressive to object-as-experience makes an unsuspected rapprochement with influential post-modern ideas like Beuy's "social sculpture" (*soziale Plastik*) or Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics."[17] All of these gestures have sought to overcome the autonomy of the work of art and restore it to some element of physical or metaphorical site or life. The key element here is the recognition of spatial ideas to constitute within themselves forms of visual thinking, reflecting thought if not aesthetic experience.

Let me briefly sketch this scenario with the *Artforum* picks above. In the first case, Feldmann's placing money on the walls of a gallery does not impart strictly speaking aesthetic experiences. But the idea of the installation is extremely thoughtful because it forces the viewer to think about the relationship between aesthetic quality and monetary reward. The exact prize takes up the wall that is awarded as a consequence of the Hugo Boss prize. Ideas of the purity of art and the illusion of the meritocracy of the art world and its spoils are called into question.

Stark's animation does not relate aesthetic experiences in the usual manner of agents reacting to one another in an expressive manner, building up a larger artistic statement. Rather, the automation of the animated figures lends a satisfying blankness to the work, as do the computer-generated voices. Their flatness becomes a metaphor for the distance separating two would-be lovers separated by cyberspace. The immediacy of feeling generated by intimate speech is yanked back into reality by its ridiculousness.

One important thing to note is that in both cases there is always an element of contrast here, which says something about post-modern art. In effect, art before post-modernism also had a larger context – think of a religious painting in the medieval period and the larger church dogmas. But that always involved a consonance between form and idea. Now we find that art is relevant when it challenges and undermines a dominant idea. We have found unexpected ways in which psychology is not overthrown but indeed reinforced through the creative processes of contemporary artists. Indeed, my speaking of metaphor suggests that we need to investigate classical categories of the formation of meaning to understand a work of post-modern art.

Unity is Not Simplicity

Now that we understand that formalism was about much more than representation, and whether or not objects could be recognized in works of modern art, we can also see that a more expansive idea of formalism always instrumentally

17 J. Beuys, "I am Searching for Field Character," in: *Art Into Society, Society Into Art*, trans. C. Tisdall, Institute of Contemporary Art, London 1974; N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du réel, Dijon 2002.

regards some formal solution in comparison to some explicit or implicit intention. It is just the case that modern and pre-modern art tended to engage with reinforcing formal and thematic ideas and post-modern art in general goes in the direction of paradoxical juxtaposition.

Here, I want to draw on another unexpected source, Solomon Asch's theory of personality impression formation. What it serves to do is enforce the idea that even in ordinary psychology, meaning is rarely formed through direct retinal impressions. In classic experiments paralleling Arnheim's own works, Solomon Asch investigated how we form an impression of a person's personality.[18] The same part qualities can interact in vastly different ways when attached to other qualities in different people.

For example, when we hear that a "cheerful" person is "funny," it is different than when we hear that a "cheerful" person is "simple." In each case, "cheerful" has changed its meaning. A person is like a work of art to the degree that sometimes there are things that we personally perceive, perhaps a person's "cheerfulness," and others that we do not (like "funny" or "simple") and have to integrate into our unified impression of that person. In the case of normally congruent qualities, we are close to the case of a traditional work of art, that is harmonious and reflects the Holy Trinity or violent and represents the Scourge of Christ, etc.

But Asch and Henri Zukier also investigated other cases, where it is harder to integrate those qualities, and I would suggest that this case is closer to our post-modern example.[19] Consider the case of the individual who is both:

Sociable—lonely

Cheerful—gloomy

Generous—vindictive

Treacherous—sentimental

Shy—courageous

Brilliant—foolish

Hostile—dependent

18 S. Asch, "Forming Impressions of Personality," in: *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 41 (1946), pp. 258-290.

19 S. Asch, H. Zukier, "Thinking about Persons," in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46 (1984), pp. 1230-1240.

Strict—kind

Ambitious—lazy

The qualities are not congruent but subjects find consistent ways to integrate them together. Indeed, Asch and Zukier found that "incongruent pairs were in general no more difficult to resolve than were fitting pairs." Individuals used different strategies: enabling, segregation, means-end, to create a plausible unifying scenario for the person. For example, ambitiousness is reconciled to laziness as a means to an end; the subject has bursts of ambition to allow him to be lazy.

Of course, this reminds us of the case of Mondrian (or Terragni) who in spite of discordant "a-centered" elements nevertheless ends up with a unified work. As Asch and Zukier state in ways very prescient for aesthetics: "Unity is not equivalent to simplicity: Persons are not simple. (However, because unity implies patterning and order, it greatly enhances the possibilities of comprehension.) It follows also that unity is not equivalent to homogeneity, nor is it at odds with contradiction or conflict."[20]

This is not too different from what we do when seeing a Christo sculpture. We see an object, a chair that seems to have traditional qualities of an artistic artifact. But it does not have the traditional trappings of an artifact, a concentration of sign-making activity. The back story is the tied rope, our knowledge of Christo's other works, ideas of mass-production in our post-industrial society. These form the incongruent terms as in Asch's later experiments.

Here, perception is "non-retinal," but Gestalt psychology upon which both Asch and Arnheim rely was founded on non-retinal principles. Their teacher Max Wertheimer experimented cases of seen movement in which there is no visual stimulation.[21] Phi-movement is experienced when two lights flash alternately and motion is perceived. Gestalt experience – psychological wholes – is not always supported by continuous physical stimulation. Arnheim has a good case that continuously existing and visible wholes are not necessary for his aesthetics but they are helpful for his main strategy of interpretation. As I am now showing, even this is not necessary.

There are vast consequences for this shift. As long as Arnheim is presumed to concern himself only with distinct wholes, he can be said to be in a passive, contemplative role. Because form is purely visual, he is a mere 'formalist.' But the spirit of Arnheim's work speaks beyond this. As he suggests in late essays like "Art Among the Objects," Arnheim has the whole weight of the gestalt tradition – not only from the laboratory demonstrations of sensory perception (and cognitive problem-solving) but the innovative ideas of Kurt Lewin on motivation, the landmark studies of group pressure of Solomon Asch and the logic

20 S. Asch, H. Zukier, *op. cit.*, p. 1240.

21 M. Wertheimer, "Experimentelle Studien über das Sehen von Bewegung," in: *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, 61 (1912), pp. 161-265.

of attribution of Fritz Heider. We have to draw from this expanded repertoire of psychological ideas in general to break Arnheim's and others' ideas out of a stale stereotype of formalism. It is not a question of *whether* perception is applicable to post-modern art – that is ludicrous – but *how*.

To conclude, as long as a non-relational idea of beauty motivates functionalist approaches to aesthetics, they will be limited. The ideas presented here, inspired by Rudolf Arnheim, point to the dynamics of experience as motivating what is artistic. Typically, putting art and beauty on a relational basis is perceived by its critics to be deflationary and limiting the power of the idea of art. However, if we recognize that to raise the very idea of art presumes a tacit idea of function, then the idea of art is senseless outside of a reflective, retrospective context. The ideas presented here give new credence to John Ruskin's words. The aim of art is not beauty but ideas. They may be consonant or dissonant; what is asked of them is that they are profound.