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ART IS RITUAL...

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Ritual is explored as a cross-cultural concept throughout historical and contemporary art and its application in art education curriculum. Art is often created through ritualistic practice, may take on the form of a ritual, or be inspired by ritual. Within the past 50 years, ritual has become a prominent theme among artists, reflecting the context of our society in an expression or reinterpretation of a tradition, a social or political statement, or a transformative way of thinking about the world. Ritual can also be an easily accessible enduring idea for art education curriculum with illustrations of how it connects to meaningful stories that reflect the cultural diversity of artists and communities of learners. Art and it’s many forms, embedded in everyday life, have long been an integral part of ritual throughout the world. The study of ritual as art curriculum, offers an opportunity to share stories that are personally meaningful and multisensory with cultural and cross-cultural significance. Examples of these instructional strategies, art making opportunities, and reflection offer art educators a model for best practice during an expanding need for global understanding and acceptance in diverse communities of the 21st century (La Porte, in press).

WHAT IS RITUAL?

Ritual has been central to human cultural experience. Its study initially focused on the exotic practices of primitive people in isolated places of the world (Brown, 1980; Durkheim, 1912), often involving various art forms as essential parts of ceremonial practices (Dissanayake, 1988). Traces of human ancestors’ ritual behavior can be found in rock art all over the world from Australia (Michaelsen, Ebersole, Smith, & Biro, 2000; Ross & Davidson, 2006) to South Africa created more than 17,000 years ago (Thackeray, 2005). Although rock art depicted rituals related to hunting, healing, and other unknown practices, the imagery and content varied across cultures, places, and time periods. Since prehistoric times, rituals have been represented in art from the mystical and religious to the secular, changing with culture over time and reflecting aspects of it. Yet, the defining properties have provoked controversy across the research of anthropologists, archeologists, art historians, philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists. As with art, there is no universal understanding of ritual, sometimes not even a comparable word for it in non-Western cultures (Bell, 1997).

Today, many religious rituals practiced for hundreds or thousands of years have declined (Bastien & Bromley, 1980), and have evolved into more secular expressions that reflect the inventions and objects of the time, place, and culture. More recently, the concept has become a prominent one among artists cross-culturally, often rooted in ceremonies and traditions.

Ritual is as controversial as the definition of art. In order to introduce the topic of ritual, I begin with a prescribed meaning based on Grimes’ (1990) notion that no single definition applies to all forms of ritual, but they do share some similarities. A flexible and generalized definition is:
a meaningful religious or secular act, performed repetitively or reactivated by a person or group that involves the mind, the body and/or the senses, sound, language, and/or material culture.

This meaning initiates an ongoing dialogue that begins with sharing some of my own art and others influenced by ritual, then, as a topic for art curriculum, including the work of high school and university students.

ARTISTS INSPIRED BY RITUAL

Many artists have been inspired by ritual. Their work takes the form of ritual and/or embraces meaningful objects or actions of ritual. Examples of these forms are evident in the artworks to follow.

My artwork, *Mother, Mary*, resembles an altar with juxtaposed artifacts of my mother’s devoted ritual of preserving home-grown, natural food against her consumption of an artificial carcinogenic substance, aspartame. A backlit medicine cabinet illuminates two large brain tumors on an MRI scan behind a display shelf covered with a hospital linen that once carried my mother’s body from gurney to ambulance to the radiation treatment table. At the center of the shelf is the radiation mask that immobilized my mother’s head during treatments. Under the mask is a hazy (see Figure 1A) half-gallon Atlas canning jar containing shredded soda cans that once contained the aspartame-tainted cola that she to her illness frequently consumed in the four years prior. The human body breaks down aspartame into the toxin, methanol, which is then converted into formaldehyde, a carcinogen and preservative. The jar is labeled with the chemical compounds in red (see Figure fingernail polish, the way my mother regularly marked her keys and tools (see Figure 1B). This juxtaposition of objects focuses on her ritualistic consumption of artificial versus the natural contents once preserved in these jars. Extending in both directions
on the altar shelf are additional jars of ritual artifacts, two containing journal notes taken throughout her illness, a quart size jar with hair that she lost during radiation treatments, braided garlic from our family garden, and other items representing my mother’s everyday life and rituals.

In another artwork, I collaborated with Mel Chin on The Fundred Dollar Bill Project. Through an interdisciplinary curriculum framework, educators taught students across the United States about New Orleans’ children being physically and mentally impacted by lead contaminated soil, and asked them to design a “Fundred” (Hundred) Dollar Bill with hopes that their efforts would support the clean-up of lead from the soil (La Porte, 2010). I transformed the collection of Fundreds from schools in the state of Arkansas into performance art in a reinterpretation of a New Orleans funeral procession (see Figure 2).

![Arkansas Fundred Dollar Bill procession](image)

**Figure 2. Arkansas Fundred Dollar Bill procession**

Besides my own interest in ritual, many other artists have been inspired by the topic. “Prevalence of Ritual” was the title of Romare Bearden’s 1971 exhibition at the MOMA in New York City. Inspired by memories of customs and ceremonies during summers spent with relatives in North Carolina and Pittsburgh, PA, he created several works including *In the Garden* (screenprint), *Baptism* (collage), and *Conjur Woman* (collage). Carmen Lomas Garza (1996) shared ritual practices from her culture in a book of paintings, including *Birthday Barbecue, Making Empanadas*, and others. Lee Mingwei’s *Letter Writing Project* commissioned by Whitney Museum of Art in 1998 was inspired by the death of his maternal grandmother and based on cultural rituals. In response to the Asian Buddhist Bon festival practice, honoring one’s ancestors, Mingwei wrote letters to his grandmother as if she was still alive, placed them on a burning paper lantern (the light symbolizing her spirit), and sent them afloat down a river. The *Letter Writing Project* encouraged art gallery visitors to stand, sit, or kneel, and write similar types of letters to a person, living or dead, within one of three wooden booths. Letters were sealed in an envelop or placed inside of a booth for viewers to read. The artist collected and mailed over 15,000 letters weekly. Those written to the deceased were ritualistically released, placed on paper lanterns on a river and set on fire.¹ Janine Antoni’s performance of *Slumber* in 1993 became an eight day and night ritual
performed at an art gallery. Including a bed, blanket, EEG machine, and loom. At night, she would sleep in the gallery and record her rapid eye movements corresponding to dreams. During the day the artist used the loom to weave the EEG patterns into the blanket she slept under using material pieces from her nightgown. At each venue, she wore a nightgown that reflected the current gallery exhibition. An altar installation in 2001 at the University of Arkansas Fine Arts Gallery in Fayetteville reflected Santa Barraza’s Chicana culture in an arrangement of cultural artifacts to comment on the many women who died from dehydration crossing the border from Mexico to the United States (see Figure 3). Even the recent sound suits created and worn by Nick Cave deal with ritual and cultural identity through everyday objects and dance.

![Figure 3. Altar installation by Santa Barraza](image)

Within the past five years, art exhibitions have also identified ritual in their titles. From September 2009 to February 2010 The Jewish Museum in New York City organized an exhibition, *Reinventing Ritual: A Contemporary Art and Design for Jewish Life* (Belasco, Ruttenberg, Rubin, Eisen, & Lasky, 2009). The museum suggested that visitors respond to questions on a bulletin board about their own personal rituals, the difference between ritual and routine, and what they remembered of childhood rituals. Some artworks in the exhibition were *Wishbone* by Alexis Canter, portraying an actual chicken wishbone cast in 14K gold on a gold chain to represent the chicken consumed on Jewish holidays. Another by Allan Wexler, *Do-It-Yourself Charity Box*, was inspired by the Jewish tradition of saving money in a box to later give to charity or some cause. *From Mouth to Mouth*, by Johanna Bresnick and Michael Cloud, included passages from the Book of Leviticus (laws about how to treat one another) contained in consumable 100 percent vegetable capsules laid out on a Kosher table of stainless steel. “Art in Odd Places 2011: Ritual,” also became a venue for artists to present public and performance art in New York City between 14th street and Avenue C to the Hudson River. Many works represented ritual based on ceremonies, myths, superstitions, and obsessions. Examples included *Tree Kisses*, a performance by Mary Ivey Martin, *Tourist in Chief*, an installation by Leon Reid IV, and *Reflection*, an interactive installation by Leonardo Selvaggio. These are only a few of the artists who have represented the concept of ritual in their work.
UNIVERSITY AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS INSPIRED BY RITUAL

The discussion and presentation of ritual included in many artists’ work can easily be motivation for university and high school students’ personal reflection and meaningful art making. Two University of Arkansas pre-service teachers and a high school student reflected on their work inspired by the artists and exhibitions mentioned above.

Colleen, an art education student, chose dinner as her important ritual and created an interactive installation (see Figure 4).

![Figure 4: Dinner ritual](image)

She wrote,

It isn’t that my ritual is unique, it is unique because of the people I share it with. As family move away, going to college and life in general, dinner has slowly evolved into a solitary ritual for myself. The idea that the dinner plate has become the take-out box is the idea of this ritual I want to explore. Dinner was a time of fellowship, but within a students' life, schedules are hard to maintain, and it can become difficult to follow tradition.

The space involved a desk and mirror situated against a wall with a thin veil around it that allowed one to see in/out. The participant would take their box into the space to eat, and would be forced to watch themselves in the mirror or avoid further pushing towards a solitary and uncomfortable environment. The audience would be encouraged to watch the participant as they can hear the audience but cannot steadily identify who they are. As a part of the process, I made several homemade dishes from my family’s recipes, dry-curd cheese filled pierogie, and potato dumplings to bridge the transition between eating family cooked meals to convenience.
I was reflecting on the transition from a family-motivated and family-oriented ritual to a more solitary one in the life of a student and... psychological and physical effects.

Another university art student, Ashley, responded with a video reflecting her ritual of bathing after going through an experience with her mother’s cancer diagnosis and treatment. She recorded images of herself bathing with background Music by Chelsea Wolfe, Hyper Oz. In her statement, she explained,

My ritual of bathing began after going through a traumatic and isolating experience, and I needed something I could trust, something that provided healing. It became very symbolic to me in that I would tell myself I was washing away what was happening. Time had gotten scary and exhausting. I was watching my mother struggle with cancer and I wished I could wash the sickness out of her and give her back a body that was pure. I found that having a positive activity once a week helped me very much with the anxiety that had come to mark the passing time in my life. I was looking for personal healing and the healing of those around me. I was looking for something supernatural. I made a video, as it is important for me to try and involve as many senses as possible, as I found the bathing process very visceral. I wanted to focus on moments or details of this experience to communicate the larger ideas. It is a very intimate task and I want it to read as intimate and voyeuristic, as that influences it seeming genuinely personal. Having the childhood memory of my mom bathing, it almost seemed somehow like a shared activity we could do, even though we were not actually bathing together. Discovering that lymphoma cells resemble water bubbles was the last piece to that visual puzzle, inexorably linking the two.

A DeQueen High School student created a collage to reflect on her daily make-up ritual (see Figure 5). In response to her artwork, Bailey stated,
To be beautiful ... that’s what every girl wants. In our society, cosmetics play a huge part in most women’s daily routine. By doing my project on this ritual, my whole perspective of make-up has changed. What used to be a beauty-maker has now become a beauty-enhancer. Women do not need make-up to be beautiful. Our society has pushed even young girls to feel the need to layer their faces in a mask of cosmetics. Through this project, I have learned how to be comfortable with myself, and not think of my make-up as a necessity. Hopefully, others will realize their true beauty.

Another student created an artist book to share the ritualistic celebration of her first birthday (see Figure 6). According to the high school art teacher, many of these students worked on their ritual inspired artwork enthusiastically outside of art class and deeply reflected on the meaningfulness of it.

Figure 6. 1st Birthday ritual

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Exploring ritual through art offers many opportunities as artists and as teachers. Since ritualized behavior is ingrained in everyday life in so many ways, the possibilities for art are endless. Whether introducing the topic as a way to uncover the stories of formal ceremonial practices or examining the meaningful rituals that emerge from secular culture, the idea offers insights into what it means to be human. As “creatures of habit,” many people seek belongingness, comfort, security, and predictability in ritual behavior. Gaining an awareness of how artists and students from diverse backgrounds interpret ritual enhances empathy and cultural understanding by drawing comparisons between ritual behaviors and uniquenesses.

There are numerous approaches to using ritual as a concept for art making and curriculum. One can challenge students to define ritual as it relates to their life experiences and to look for inspiration among the many artists who have transformed rituals into art. Teachers can introduce specific themes that are relevant to students’ individual interests (i.e., morning ritual, daily ritual, school ritual, community ritual, and family ritual). Examples abound in school or community life, and as celebrations or
special occasions. The focus might be narrowed to particular ritual objects and/or experiences and the stories they reveal.

Media forms might be chosen depending on student knowledge and skills. Novice artists could transform ritual into art using a specific medium, simplified into a still life drawing of a ritual object, a print, sculpture, or painting. For advanced students with basic knowledge in a variety of media, choices and applications can be more subjective. Whatever the approach, students are likely to be motivated and challenged, become more aware of their own rituals, learn artistic skills, and begin to understand the cultural variations that others practice.

Whether artists or students, exploring art as ritual encompasses all cultures and peoples throughout time. Artists of diverse cultural heritage provide abundant examples to inspire reflection and art making. Students come to view their own behaviors as manifestations of the human condition, which cultivates open-mindedness and a broader cultural understanding. Overall, cross-cultural and global concerns foster an understanding of personally meaningful rituals, and inspire creative self-expression. Rituals are transdisciplinary, transcultural, and a natural part of meaningful human experience.

NOTES


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SOMETHING HAPPENED TO ART

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When I first saw the topic of this year’s conference, Art is..., my first thoughts were surprisingly pessimistic – I finished the phrase Art is... with “underappreciated,” “not understood” and “woefully missing from American education and culture.” I find that I say these phrases to myself rather often when I’m leaving clients who have just told me that they can’t visualize things in 3-dimensions and that they’re not sure that they can “read my drawings” – skills that should be as basic as reading words and adding numbers.

We don’t need to be poets in order to read and we don’t need to be accountants in order to add and subtract—so why does one need to be an artist to develop visual and spatial literacy—to have vision and have the ability to envision? We know that art education is based in an exploration of the two and three dimensional and a great source for visual literacy education; however, since most of the population does not study art, I decided to look outside of art and design theory to research cultural traditions, cognitive science and how the tools we use impact how we comprehend, how we think and how we create.

I’m an architect, and while my presentations are by necessity visual, many of my clients don’t understand the most basic of visual communications. I spend a lot of time trying to teach clients to understand what they see. And while 3-D modeling can go a long way in communicating ideas, clients still can’t imagine variations or modifications to the designs. And many of my clients are no more able to draw what they want than they are able to describe their ideas in words.

Given this ongoing challenge, I thought I’d use this occasion to try to understand what happened historically to create this disparity between the left and right brains. We know that ancient cultures communicated visually— but there has been a historic disconnect. And I wanted to look at studies into new technology to see if this imbalance could be leveled.

I started by looking at definitions of visual literacy so that I could establish a baseline. There are many variations:

- a group of competencies that an individual can develop by seeing
- the ability to understand and produce visual messages, and the one that I find to be lacking in my encounters,
- the ability to interpret visual messages as well as generate images for communicating ideas and concepts. Wileman (1993)

In his 2001 book Racing the Antelope, long-distance runner Bernd Heinrich noted that when animals chase their prey, they stop when they can no longer see their objects of desire. By contrast, humans have the intellectual capacity to understand
that when an animal has disappeared over the horizon or has run behind some rocks, it is still out there. Heinrich writes:

The neural changes that provided our ancestors with the imagination to understand, through logic, the continued existence of something that is no longer visible, together with the anatomical attributes that enabled them to outrun prey over long distances, would have had a genuine evolutionary advantage. Without these survival-enhancing functional origins, it is unlikely that we would have the neural equipment to create art.

In this example, it’s the ability to see something that isn’t visible that makes us human.

Humans are born with the neural equipment to think about their place in the world, whether by using logic or anticipating the future, and humans have the capacity and potential to create art—to think visually and spatially as well as linguistically and mathematically. Archeologists have estimated that a primitive form of the paintbrush existed more than 12,000 years ago. The ancient Egyptians developed a form of writing around 3000 BC. They created hieroglyphs, a combination of graphic images and individual phonetic alphabet symbols, and they chiseled on stone or wrote on papyrus using thin reed brushes and reed pens. Both the instruments used to write the symbols of language and the visual symbols themselves are tools that leave an imprint on our brains.

The letter forms themselves—Roman in the west and Calligraphic in the east—have structured our brains to comprehend in different ways. Studies of children with learning disciplines have isolated a number of skills related to functional handwriting. Writing the Roman alphabet relies on and develops fine motor control, hand-eye coordination, in-hand manipulation, visual recognition, sustained attention and sensory awareness of the fingers. The tools used to create the individual characters are hard, pointed objects. The Roman alphabet’s combination of lines and curves represent sounds rather than concepts. And the combination of sounds present ideas in a verbal, linear fashion.

Similar studies of children and Alzheimer’s patients have looked into the psychological dimensions of Chinese calligraphy. Calligraphic characters represent abstract concepts which, when combined, create another means of communication. Here, handheld, soft-tipped brushes are used to create the symbols of its language. The process of creating these characters requires visual and spatial abilities, serving the purpose of conveying thoughts while also showcasing an abstract beauty of lines. Each symbol is a pattern of strokes inscribed within an invisible, subdivided square space, and each explores geometric principles such as connectivity, closure, orientation, proportion and symmetry. And these visual/spatial properties develop the areas of the brain that perceive and understand visual/spatial information. (Kao, 2006)

How did this happen?

As early as the 7th century, the quill pen appeared in Seville, Spain. This tool was used specifically for writing words and numbers. The first mention of the paintbrush in western history is attributed to Cennino Cennini, a Tuscan painter. In his 15th century *Il libro dell’arte*, Cennini describes pigments, brushes, drawing, panel painting, frescos, painting on fabrics and castings as well as oil painting, although painting with oils is
described as early as 1125 in Theophilus’ treatise, On Divers Arts. By now, European artists were working with paintbrushes and those writing for the church and for government were using quill pens.

Technology writer Nicholas Carr (2010) writes about 3 “intellectual technologies” that reshaped our brains: the map, the mechanical clock and the printing press. He cites the printing press and printed books as tools that tipped the scale toward linear thinking. As with most western inventions, the earliest printing presses were developed in Asia—but the technology never took off, perhaps because of the difficulty of creating the vast number of characters and symbols. Gutenberg’s upgraded design of the printing press in 1440 was well suited to the Roman alphabet—and its popularity gave us a more attentive way of thinking. This new technology separated illustrations from type—and the visual images fell by the wayside. (Stokes, 2001)

When we are reading a book, we become immersed in a progression of words and sentences across page after page. Novels begin to be written and published—without illustrations. We pay close attention to what we were reading, and our brains become adept at understanding this linear progression of ideas.

By the mid-1800s, the invention of the typewriter sealed the deal. The verbal as the primary means of communication triumphed.

By contrast, and with different tools, the Chinese developed a more balanced verbal/visual culture. About the same time the quill pen was invented, China’s Sung Dynasty (960-1279) saw a period of economic prosperity and technological innovation. Intellectuals regarded public service as their calling, yet in private they pursued artistic interests. Their vocations demanded language skills, their avocations required visual ones, and both—calligraphy and painting—shared tools and formats: brush and ink on silk or paper. The culture remained more balanced. So now we have new tools—electronic technologies—that are re-shaping the way we think. But are they helping or hurting our visual comprehension. The studies are inconclusive, at best. Let’s start with the evolution of spatial communication from the map to the GPS.

As noted previously, Nicholas Carr listed the map as a brain-changer. Before the development of the map, people knew where they were and where they were going by seeing what was around them and experiencing their travels. With the advent of the map, people had a new tool for understanding where they were in space. The map is an abstract picture of space—a two-dimensional representation of our 3-dimensional world. In addition to helping us figure out how to get from here to there, establishing political boundaries or presenting adjacencies, the map trained our minds to think more abstractly. It helped us see beyond the paper on which the map was printed.

The skills developed by reading maps and thinking abstractly about space can be applied to other situations that require spatial reasoning such as manipulating 3D shapes and geometric information in our heads—or solving the Rubik’s cube. In a 2007 study, geographer Amy Lobben of the University of Oregon identified several
spatial abilities needed in order to read a map. These included “route memory,” one’s ability to remember the way, without breadcrumbs, and “map rotation” or the ability to know which way to turn without rotating the map. But by far the most important factor in map reading is an individual’s ability to relate where he or she is in the real world to the corresponding spot on a map by observing roads, buildings and intersections—something called “self-location.” Yet we don’t teach map reading in our basic curricula.

Interestingly, the Geography discipline has made a concerted effort to teach spatial literacy and establish a culture of spatial thinking. (Lee, 2012) A Spatial Thinking Abilities Test (STAT) was developed in 2009, and it has shown a positive correlation between visual training gained in geo-technology courses and students’ STAT scores.

But now we have GPS. How has this impacted the visual training offered by the map? Step-by-step instructions are supplanting the visual map as a means to instruct people how to navigate. Geospatial technologies are becoming ubiquitous, and location matters more than ever before. Where’s the closest Starbucks? Can Uber find me? Unfortunately, access to web-based mapping systems and location identification software is not the same as visual competence. According to California records, people now lose their way more often than ever because they are over-reliant on their navigation systems, and in remote locations, such as California’s Death Valley, when the system isn’t working, a lack of knowledge about one’s location can be a matter of life and death (Clark 2011). Here it is clear that technology is hindering our visual, spatial competencies.

On the other hand, many see advances in visual literacy growing out of the increased presence of the computer, the tablet, the mobile phone—and all of the screens now so much a part of our lives.

In the book Page to Screen: Taking Literacy Into the Electronic Era, Ilana Snyder and Michael Joyce speculate that “the visual may be more useful [than words and numbers] for transmitting large amounts of certain kinds of information.” After several centuries of the written word being the predominant mode of communication and representation, a major shift is taking place. We work on a pixelated screen—equally adept at representing words and images—and the screen presents opportunities for interaction between and among the modes of communication. Photoshop images can be imported into Word documents and text can be copied and pasted into visual programs. The computer is changing the way 21st century children’s brains are forming. They seem to be born with the ability to work with screens of all shapes and sizes. Both hemispheres of their brains are activated in ways that previous generations’ cognitive skills were not. This is not a race to see if the visual can overtake the verbal. Rather it is a realization that we can use both sides of our brains equally.

In A Whole New Mind, Daniel Pink states that technology was built with the left-brain abilities of logic, analysis, literalness, and sequentially. But he posits that the right-brain abilities of creativity, empathy, pattern recognition, and the making of meaning are necessary for technology to flourish in the future. He believes that developing these abilities will become part of the definition of what it means to be human.
Recently, we have begun to see that the gap between verbal and visual competence is shrinking. Information is being presented in more visually oriented formats. “The results are leading to a visualization movement in modern computing whereby complex computations are presented graphically, allowing for deeper insights as well as heightened abilities to communicate data and concepts.” Conceptual images help make seemingly unintelligible data understandable. In recognizing the impossibility of recording volumes of concepts and information, Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci recorded his ideas as drawings. We hope history repeats itself; if it does, we are likely to find that some information is better presented visually rather than verbally.

But the future isn’t clear. MIT professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology Sherry Turkle notes that “if we take the computer as a carrier of a way of knowing, a way of seeing the world and our place in it, we are all computer people now.” But what “does that mean? Is the computer encouraging us to actively develop a fuller capacity to comprehend or is it making us more passive? We’re at a crucial point. If we allow computer technology to influence us—like our reliance on GPS, we will become lost; if we influence the direction of computer technology, we will certainly advance visual literacy. And then, Art will be appreciated, understood and clearly visible in American education and culture.

There’s a story I like to tell about non-verbal communication. It’s not about technology or tools—but just how the visual can be so powerful—and why it’s important that we encourage, support and develop visual literacy. It’s about the conductor Arturo Toscanini. During a rehearsal of Debussy’s La Mer, he couldn’t find the words to describe the effect he wanted to express in a particular passage. Eventually, he took a silk handkerchief from his pocket and tossed it high into the air. The members of the orchestra watched as the handkerchief slowly and gracefully descended to the floor. “There,” he said, “play it like that” (Fadiman, 1985).

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ART AND REVELATION

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ecological science, as it seems accessible to most educated people, is a clue for understanding the ontology and truth of art. Nowhere within the study of natural reality (or just “reality”) is there such a vivid ground in relational metaphysics and epistemology. Even at the most superficial level disclosure of the elements of ecology is never disclosure, and can never be disclosure, of a single entity. All things in the natural world are what they are, function as they function, and are properly comprehended only according to the nature of relations.

And we do not want to lose the connection between art and natural science or, as the more naive picture would have it, the connection between art and nature. Nature has always been a leading causal source for and analogue to human creation and the imaginative enterprise. I will argue in the next few minutes that the rigor of natural science is a schemata for rigor in the arts. I also argue that to disconnect science and art destroys both because it destroys the underlying ontology of each. The common ways and means of this disconnection also radically marginalizes art. Our culture has already determined that science, in all its forms (even social science) must trump art with respect to truth and a truthful vision of natural and human reality (which on my view are the same). One might even argue that the difference has become categorical with science as truth and truth generating procedure, the humanities in some sort of tormented middle category (including philosophy and history) and art as- at best- a serious form of entertainment or some way for students to develop imaginative skill.

II. ECOLOGY AND REVELATION

No inquiry is possible without limits to the content and domain of inquiry. Ecology can only proceed on the basis of natural law (at the most abstract level) and then on the basis of how those laws create the conditions of any local or particular eco-system. Particular eco-systems, for instance an Oak Savannah, have components that play by their own rules in relation to natural law (of physics, biology, chemistry) and according to the specific structures of the organisms and land present. We cannot conceive of a natural reality that can operate, in any sense, without the laws that create limits and with the study of the limits come specific predictive power. Without the idea that nature is subject to prediction generally, a basic presupposition in the epistemology and ontology of science, there is no reality to inquire into. Any reality, to be an object of judgment or an object for explanation, must be structured in such a way as to provide the content for judgment or explanation. In short, all elements of the ecology and the ecology as a whole, is predictable (at least on principle) on the basis of laws and ongoing observation. The ecologist, on the basis of the above limits (that contain relations) has a power for cognitive transformation. What is seen initially as a simple landscape, objects
related to each other in space, can now be brought together according to the dense web of a system. Empirical cognition of the landscape moves from naïve or barely comprehended single relations to a synthetic totality of elements where nothing in the totality is arbitrary.

These descriptive points lead us back to the nature of explanation. I argued that “predictive power” is an a priori epistemic condition of science and not a result of science. In less formal terms, the explanations we seek can be found but they are necessarily expansive according to the density of relations. What does it mean to explain anything in the natural world from the standpoint of a single living thing? For example, why does the cardinal in my cedar tree have a red-ish head? Micro-level explanations that enlist DNA as a sufficient condition for the red-ish head lack the holism required for the obvious reason that the micro-level itself needs explanation. Ultimately, evolutionary explanation must be enlisted and these forms of explanation presuppose relations: nothing can evolve in strict relation to itself. Isolating anything in nature is to diminish or kill the thing in question and at the same time we diminish or kill our comprehension of things.

The cognitive transformation I mentioned previously is possible only because of the unity of natural reality. Cognitive transformation of the environment to a unity of elements based on laws and then schematized into local conditions is the revelation of nature. For those who are untutored revelations of this sort need not be out of bounds.

Suppose that while hiking the Continental Divide Trail we see an Elk herd moving into a meadow: just on the basis of the sheer size of the animals we can recognize the scope of land necessary to support this magnitude. Our minds and our sense perception do not have to struggle too hard or reach too far to also know that these animals are logically and empirically inseparable from their world, that they belong to a vast wilderness well beyond the lens of our immediate awareness. This experience just is the elemental amazement for the natural world; how creatures are embedded and related is an initial explanation of their existence and it brings to light the sublime nature of their reality. Without the relational and lawful keys in the background, we are clueless, dumbstruck and perhaps panicked. We will lack the “anticipation of perception” which underlies revelation.

Ecological revelation is then a sudden or gradually caused comprehensive insight into the opaque density of natural relations that make up a totality. Hence revelation is here more like “seeing” than it is like “telling” but it has, always as a background, a rigorous practice of observation. Hence, revelation is ultimately restricted to adequate observers, which requires the ontological awareness already mentioned. We cannot dream up specific relations any more than we can simply intuit them. But we can presuppose a specific structure to reality. And when I say “comprehensive insight into the totality” I am referring only to aspects that beckon the idea of a totality. To have an actual totality literally “in mind” is to outstrip the possibilities of mind and experience and such comprehension would undercut amazement before it could arrive at revelation. A God’s eye view erodes or simply destroys the finitude of imaginative insight. (God cannot be amazed or experience amazement.)
III. THE HUMAN CONDITION AND REVELATION

The human condition, insofar as it can be an object of inquiry, must also then be strictly limited. As we step into what Charles Taylor calls “the semantic dimension” there must be analogies to natural law that at the same time do not supplant or replace natural laws. Just like any other creature living in an ecology, the human being is subject to natural laws. And at the highest level of abstraction these natural laws give us limits that can be translated or schematized into the basis of meaning and so the basis of art. What I have in mind here are inescapable facts that follow from natural law and create a never ending struggle for human beings: mortality and finitude. We can call these “universals” and not panic because they are firmly grounded in naturalism. We do not need to have metaphysical or epistemic battles over these universals as we might over Platonic or Hegelian universals. And they certainly do not point to some monolithic truth that is art or is beauty. Art generates a plurality of imaginative acts and meanings from these universals just because they show up in all kinds of ways depending on the human ecology in question. But the most important point initially, especially for art, is that mortality and finitude are frequently concealed and all sorts of human folly and tragedy follow in the wake of that concealment. Art reveals the concealment and so the grossest of human errors. Hence art tells the truth in at least two ways: it arises from and is possible only because of our limits (mortality and finitude) and it then proceeds to relentlessly reveal these limits as we try to conceal them. The possibility of human well-being is wrapped in a virulent conundrum: we need the open acceptance of our limits but we are motivated to conceal them. (The conundrum is nothing more than a statement of the way finitude works on self-reflective beings.) “Mortality” is inescapable and analytic to however we want to construe human life and death and it points at our finitude. Human beings deny mortality in a host of ways documented by social science; obviously enough, denial depends on an awareness of mortality (which is part of the way humans are mortal). Motivation of denial is wrapped in the finality of things: mortality is terrifying, horrible, and absurd. Denial then has bad effects on the manner in which relations are shaped within the ecology. A strong desire for power and control are often ways that we deny mortality and it is no accident that art always reveals the desire for power and control as human disaster. The concealment of what is constitutive of our agency will pronounce the opposite of our agency. Hence people will endeavor to cancel their limits and the limits of their world and as they do they participate in their own destruction. Out of this self-destructive capacity, the artist produces tragedy as the revelation of disaster or the conditions of disaster. Art is then explanation.

But then mortality is built into every aspect of natural reality. Here I should include “finitude.” I am using the term to refer to specific limits in being. Our condition is then grounded in these limits: profound and continuous deprivations in knowledge, goodness, wisdom, power and control (especially over ourselves). Naturally enough, we endeavor to conceal these deficits and in the process we intentionally aim at destroying ourselves and the natural world.

Examples are, I suppose, demanded in some sense although the abstract nature of the topic fights against them. From narrative fiction, I offer Faulkner’s *The Bear* as paradigmatic of a schemata from universal to particular. Mortality and finitude first find expression in the human capacity for denial. “Wilderness” is gradually retreating
from a human onslaught which is then disguised as technological innovation and economic progress. The narrative is saturated in the sorrow of this loss and in the sorrow of the Bear’s inevitable death. Old Ben can survive the human hunters in ways that seem nearly supernatural, but his magnificent existence only more sorrowfully reveals his mortality. That he can survive these attacks in the ways he does expresses the embedded finitude: such capacities are meaningful only as they are vulnerable. And the human tragedy commences as the very ground for sanity, the wilderness, the representation of a much wider ecology that is our possibility and the bear’s possibility, is wiped away.

The idea that “wilderness” is somehow the ground of our sanity seems like an idle fancy. Hence, we must enlist another element of ecology: the ever broadening and expanding scope of explanation. On the surface of things, wilderness has nothing to do with our sanity or our possibilities as relational beings. And it is right here where the greatest dangers lie unattended. Wilderness speaks of the overwhelming depth of nature which is ultimately our origin. To destroy this is to eliminate, by degree, the tangible and sublime awareness of our joint origin: in other words, spiritual death. This is precisely the predictive power of Faulkner’s own ecology. He is showing us spiritual death through imaginative revelation.

Human cognition, as is currently demonstrated by cognitive science, works at distinct levels. We can and do represent object to ourselves as kinds of objects; hence, we can generate “wilderness as object.” And then, of course, we can represent it to ourselves as a resource, as what Heidegger called “standing reserve”, the consequences of which Faulkner reveals in his story. This sort of awareness, objects as kinds of objects, is not sufficient for the revelation of connections or the meaning of connections. In fact, delusional states become possible just because of this awareness. An animal, such as a bear, cannot produce delusional states within itself or its ecology for the simple reason that it can never turn the ecology into an object of thought.

Philosophical inquiry at a very high level can produce delusional states. To be specific, a delusional state is a state that produces a gross misrepresentation of our condition in the world. For example, when Descartes rapidly descends into his own subjectivity (in *Meditations*) he thoroughly believes he is then revealing the nature of that subjectivity. And, as we might expect, such a descent seems to purify his nature as an isolated, simple entity: a mind capable of existing separately and generating all sorts of ideas independently of other minds.

This purified subject then turns to itself and realizes itself as not just a thing that thinks but a thing that chooses and affirms. In order to perform the mental act of affirmation this type of cognition must at the same time “see” the act. In seeing itself affirming it sees itself as demonstrating its own freedom. Hence freedom is, from the beginning of modern philosophy, an intrinsic and analytic element of human consciousness and it does not depend on any features of “the external world.” Human beings are, by the nature of their own cognition, free and responsible beings.
On the basis of the ecological ontology I am working with this view of freedom has to be delusional: it is a systematic and methodological denial of relations as built into our nature. And, as Spinoza points out, relations are a necessary aspect of our finitude. To be related to others as a condition of one’s being is to be limited by others. Descartes is denying this condition in his purified subjectivity and in his disconnected observation of his own freedom. The philosophical problem with such a self-aware demonstration of freedom is that it can never rule out a causality that eludes self-awareness. And the more we come to know about human beings, the more we see all sorts of relations that create gross limitations on both self-awareness and freedom.

This delusional state of a purified subjectivity and a self-contained freedom of the will is constant and inevitable fodder for artistic and ecological revelation. In our misrepresentation of ourselves to ourselves we produce a horrifying superficiality in human reality and then all the violence that comes with that reality. This delusional state can be named, “the tragedy of final judgment” which means, in ordinary language, individual selves are finally guilty or innocent. A misrepresentation of the categories belonging to responsibility is also a misrepresentation of human agency. Hence this one mistake, as in any ecology, interconnects with other aspects of our self-awareness and then produces more delusional states on very basic levels: this is precisely how we blame individuals for ecological failures. In other words, systematic delusional states that undermine competent agency.

While it might be right, in many ways, to say that the shooter is responsible for the mass murder, at the same time the language and the concepts utilized entirely miss the reality of the ecology as the existential ground of human persons. In other words, the delusional state I just described, when placed in relation to an ecological ontology, has enormous explanatory power. The ecological explanation is going to reveal realities simply unavailable at the level of the individual.

Within narrative art the nature of ecological explanation first represents and then reveals the tragedy of final judgment. Art-in its finest form-implicates the whole ecology. In Faulkner’s ragged novel Sanctuary there is a vivid example of the tragedy of final judgment. Of course, we want to think that we are freely associating with one another, that our relations are self-constructed relations. But they are deeply relational: we come to associate with one another from the sort of people we are and the sort of people we are is grounded within the ecology. Hence the evil in Sanctuary finds expression in the character Popeye but all of his evil and all of the causes of his evil are found in various aspects of every character and the ecology is itself violently deprived. Faulkner tells his tale and only in the last section of the novel is Popeye given the background that is necessary for the full reality of a human being.

This background, constructed from the imagination is nothing more- in the end- than all of the ecological components we have seen throughout the novel. All of these pieces come together to reveal a synthetic totality that includes Popeye as a necessary component. Popeye is then assimilated into the ruin of this larger picture. Finally, the ruin is revealed from the standpoint of surface elements that create delusional states that then create evil. Popeye and all the other characters are
actually treated as isolated entities and the characters treat themselves as isolated entities, thus denying the human condition. These ideas bear some resemblance to Arendt’s notion that evil is rootless or on the surface, like a weed species.

The wide net of ecological explanation gives content to the cliché riddled ideas about narrative art as speaking to the human condition. Naturally, literally naturally, we cannot understand human beings as we condense explanations of their behavior to purified subjectivity. “Walking a mile in another person’s shoes” is empty and pointless insofar as the shoes are represented from that person’s subjectivity as if it is a purified subjectivity. It is only when we explain how the subjectivity is produced that we have any ground for the mostly overrated notion of empathy. Here I am trying to affirm empathy as the comprehension that anything that befalls human beings is an aspect of our shared human condition. A realization that we are built and shaped from the same stuff, mortality and finitude, is no easy task, it requires an ever widening circle of explanations that reflect a synthetic totality of elements. This comprehension is the act of building freedom into the ecology and it also dismisses transcendence of our condition as vanity and ignorance.

IV: ECOLOGY AND VISUAL ART

Language seems to have a power to create worlds, to form ecologies from the imagination, whereas visual art seems radically confined by comparison. I believe this is a fallacious notion and, in fact, the visual may possess more semantic capacity for revelation than narrative. The image of a thing or person may more readily connect to its condition than any linguistic narration. But I cannot pursue this idea here, I can only make a few remarks that build on the basic point.

Given my lack of knowledge in visual art I cannot proceed abstractly: I must enlist the immediate help of examples. Admittedly this does disrupt the adequate development of philosophical argument, so I am only endeavoring to point the way to those arguments.

Francis Bacon’s series of “Pope” paintings from the 1940’s and 50’s seem a provocative possibility for my previous ideas. First of all, the original painting by Velasquez, that Bacon used as a model and distorted, is a masterpiece of Pope Innocent X presented in calm authority. Bacon’s distortion may only be possible in all its truthfully disturbing qualities from the vast confusion between our mortal/finite condition and some other condition that borders on the transcendent. Such a confusion distresses the nature of ecology itself and so distresses relational principles. Hence the Pope now appears fragmented even in relation to himself; in one of the paintings his mouth is actually separate from the rest of his body. An inward collapse, followed by visual fragmentation from the self and isolation from all other things could be explained by the denial of ecology that transcendence from our condition seems to quickly imply. The suffering and “existential anguish” presented in the paintings is made possible by the delusions of transcendence or conceiving of any human individual as distinct from our shared condition.

As one looks at these paintings, the connection between the elements within the paintings are themselves strained. There may be a literalism present. All visuals, to
acquire semantic content, must somehow connect their elements into a totality: this is the ecology of painting. One would like to say that the representation of a human figure as somehow standing outside our basic condition has to end up revealing a disjointed and so confused reality. Bacon is pointing the way to nihilism.

NOTES

1. The example of the Elk’s presence suggesting a much wider world than is immediately present was first suggested to me by Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press) 88. I have expanded the example according to an actual experience. My son Sam and I were hiking the Continental Divide Trail in Northern New Mexico and were literally surrounded by Elk. The size of the animal is quite amazing and then all of them together was sublime.

2. The phrase, “anticipation of perception” is borrowed from Kant’s famous section in *Critique of Pure Reason*. One could say that the entire argument in the first section is borrowed from Kant, although I did not intend my analysis to be “transcendental” in Kant’s sense. My intent is a direct realism with inference to the best explanation as a basis. On the other hand, I would never have had any of these thoughts if it were not for reading Kant over and over again.
A HEGELIAN THEORY OF THEORIES OF ART

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Artists create art. Philosophers worry about what artists are doing. Philosophers have been doing this since at least the fifth century BC. The problem with most of the philosophical theories about the nature of art and art-making is that although they say something significant about art, perhaps even something essential, they do not cover all objects and actions which are today called art. I will briefly survey some of the major theories about the nature of art, and then propose that this is one of the areas of human making which does not have to be accounted for by one theory. I will propose that there are several theories about the nature of art which can all be accepted. One way of accepting multiple theories is to propose that each has had its time in history and has now been superseded. But another way, closer to the spirit of Hegel, is to propose that each of these accounts of art can be regarded as part of an organic whole which is constantly evolving and manifesting itself in different ways. I take the latter route. I begin with a brief look at four big essentialist theories of art.

A BRIEF LOOK AT FOUR BIG ESSENTIALIST THEORIES

1. THE MIMETIC THEORY

The mimetic theory is that a work of is an object or activity which imitates nature. Plato in his famous criticisms of imitative art in Book X of the Republic assumes that much of art is about imitation. After ancient Greece, mimeticism in many guises remained the principal idea of the visual arts in the West until the 18th century. In its long western history, mimeticism went through many phases—the neo-Platonist proposal that artists imitate other-worldly Ideas (Plotinus); that artist ought, in their imitation of natural objects, improve or perfect nature by eliminating nature’s imperfections (Cicero and Quintilian); to the position that works of art ought to imitate nature with all of its flaws and ugliness1 The middle ages continued to produce art objects within the mimetic tradition, but barely. Figures and objects are often represented in a highly stylized way. The mosaic images in Ravenna display, in James Snyder’s phrase, an “advanced abstraction.” Bodies are reduced to flat carpets of surface patterns, rigid frontality, the figures fill the picture frame with little indication of a spatial setting.2 The artisan rejects natural lighting, perspective, and modeling; he refines all matter until the saint becomes a “transparent, weightless shell, until the body is distilled into a pure form to contemplate.”3

But mosaics are still within the naturalistic, mimetic tradition. They simply have a different goal than ancient paintings and sculpture. The goal is to enhance worship, or to remind the viewer of a religious story. This is not a loss of the skills of the Greeks and Romans to accurately depict nature; rather it is a change in goals. The goal now is to refer the mind of the viewer to the spiritual. This is still a form of mimeticism, but it is what Osborne calls “abstraction-in-representation.”4 Depictions of figures or of nature are simplified or exaggerated or distorted.
The Renaissance continued the mimetic tradition, and indeed revitalized it by mastering anatomy and perspective. Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) in his treatise on sculpture states that the goal of the painter and sculptor is “that as nearly as possible the work they have undertaken shall appear to the observer to be similar to the real objects of Nature.” He goes on to state that the “sculptor’s art of achieving likeness is directed at two ends: one is that the image he makes should resemble this particular creature, say a man [i.e., generic man]; the other end is” is “to represent and imitate” a specific person.

In conclusion, Moshe Barasch states that “there is . . . one belief that was regarded as dogma and that was reverently observed by everybody who thought, or wrote, on painting and sculpture [in the Renaissance]: the belief that the visual arts imitate nature.” He continues: “Not a single Renaissance treatise fails to make the point that the imitation of nature is the very aim of painting and sculpture and that the more closely a work of art approaches this aim the better it is.” It should be noted, however, that for Renaissance artists imitating nature meant imitating through the art works of antiquity.

Expressionism

Mimeticism has never faded in art-making; but the Romantic movement is characterized by expression more than imitation. The expressionist theory of art arose in the early 20th century, under the strong influence of the 18th and 19th century Romantic movement in literature, music and the visual arts. Robin Collingwood formulated the most complete articulation of this theory in his 1938 The Principles of Art. The creation of works of art is the expression of emotions. In the creative process, the artist moves from a vague, undefined emotion to a clarification of the emotion in the art object. An art object, then, is the articulated embodiment of the emotions of the artist. As an essentialist theory of art—assuming that his account of art is true in all ages and places—the theory fails to account for vast number of works created on commission or under duress or for non-aesthetic reasons.

II. FORMALIST THEORY

In Clive Bell’s classic version of the formalist theory (1914), the formal characteristics of a work of art—color, line, texture, shapes, masses, pattern, and so on, are what art is all about. The content is irrelevant to the identification of a work as art. A landscape or portrait is simply a means for arranging color, line and shapes. These formal characteristics evoke in the art-audience a “peculiar emotion,” one which is only experienced in the presence of art. “To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and color and a knowledge of three-dimensional space.”

Although Bell’s theory has been much criticized and is rarely defended today, it does capture something distinctive about works of art—namely, in art the formal characteristics of the work (whether the language of a poem or novel or the color, masses, texture and so on of a painting) is just as important as the content (the story or portrait figure or landscape). This is a part of the art work complex left out by the mimetic and expressionists theories.
III. INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

The last of the big theories is the Institutional Theory. This was formulated by George Dickie in the 1970s but anticipated by Arthur Danto in “The Artworld” (1964). A work of art is an artifact that has had conferred upon it the status of art by someone qualified within the ongoing institution of art. George Dickie formulated this theory in order to account for the extremely diverse character of contemporary art. How can one include the huge variety of art objects and actions under the label “art”? For Dickie and defenders of this theory (Jerrold Levinson) the answer is that anything accepted by the artworld is a work of art. If this strikes you as very latitudinous, well that is its intent.

These are the principal theories of art which have dominated the history of Western art. All of them are essentialist, not in the sense that there is some attributes of the art object which classifies the work as art; but in the sense that the theories claim to be applicable to all art at all times.

IV. ON STAGES AND EVOLUTION

Another approach toward trying to capture what art is all about is some sort of evolutionary stage theory. In contrast to the essentialist approach, this might be labeled “historicism.” Historicism rose in the late 1770s and 1780s in Germany. It leading thinkers in Germany were J.G. Hamann, Justus Möser and Johann Gottfried Herder. Hese authors reacted against what they regarded as the common practice of judging past cultures in terms of one’s own. Historicism for these authors meant (1) everything in the social and political worlds has a history. All laws, institutions, beliefs and practices are subject to change, and each is the result of a specific historical development. 2) And we should examine all human beliefs, practices and institutions in their historical context, showing how they arise from specific economic, social, legal and cultural and geographic conditions.

Historicist accounts of art, in the form of stage theories, have enjoyed a bit of a revival in the past few decades in the works of Arthur Danto and Larry Shiner. But the root of these theories is Hegel. I will begin with Hegel and then turn to the recent stage theories of Danto and Shiner.

Hegel

Hegel’s grand theory of the history of art is only one refraction of his grand view of all history. In his general scheme, history is the unfolding and return of Absolute Spirit—that is, God. For Hegel, the history of art, like all human history, is an articulation of the rational activity of God. And like all events in time, it goes through a process of development which is moving toward a goal. This process is not random or haphazard; it is rational, and that is why there is a discoverable pattern in the process of history.

Hegel sketches three stages of the history of art. The first stage is symbolic. Hegel’s paradigm for this type of art is the art of the pre-classical East, especially ancient
Egypt and India. Like all art for Hegel, the art of ancient Egypt and India sought to express Geist, but its conception of the Divine was too vague and indeterminate. Hence artists had to resort to symbolism. Ancient Egyptian and Indian art searched for ways to express Geist, but fell back on multiple sensuous forms, none of which adequately reflect Geist. These forms only crudely and vaguely, through guesses, point to Spirit.16

Hegel’s second stage is classical. This form of art was captured most fully by the Greeks. The focus of Greek art on the human figure (often presented as gods) is for Hegel a profound insight because only humans contain Spirit in sensuous form. Greek art was an art-religion in the sense that much of Greek art attempts to put the Greek gods into sensuous forms. Nonetheless, for Hegel, this art is also too lodged in the sensuous to be adequate to capture Geist.

The third stage of art is Romantic. Hegel’s use of this term is a very misleading in light of modern usage. For Hegel Romantic art includes the art from roughly the beginnings of the Christian era to his own day (early 19th century). This is a higher form than the Classical and Symbolic because of its emphasis on subjectivity in the sense of conscious reflection. For example, depictions of Christ’s passion are concerned with the spirit of the figure portrayed. Romantic art is more inward than classical; it is about spirit and mind. It is not bound to three-dimensionality.17

But even this last stage of art is not adequate to express the Divine to humanity or to fulfill Absolute Spirit. All forms and stages of art are too bound to the sensuous, too external to fulfill these goals. The purpose and goal of art is to contribute to the complete self-realization of Geist. Thus art is about grasping the Divine. But art can only go so far in doing this. “With the advance of culture, there generally comes a time for every people when art points beyond itself.”18 The discipline which, for Hegel, can reach the highest achievement in the pursuit of Geist is philosophy. Why philosophy? Because philosophy engages in persistent self-reflection.

This grand story of art is probably not very convincing to the modern mind. Where Hegel is wrong—aside from the problems with Absolute Spirit & the directional flow of history—is that these stages or forms of art are not restricted to specific times in history. They reappear periodically and mix with other forms. Where Hegel is right, I suggest, is his historicizing of art

**Danto and the Death of Art**

Another theory of stages is Arthur Danto’s “death of art.” First proposed in 1984, Danto, acknowledges his debt to Hegel and following Hegel’s preference for trinities, proposes that there are three stages in the history of western art.19

Danto describes the “progressive stage” as the claim that art during this period of time is the progressive conquest of natural appearances. More traditionally this may be called the mimetic theory, that art is the imitation of nature and through mastering foreshortening and perspective inter alia, artists became progressively better at this task. Danto states that progress here is essentially “optical duplication— the painter commanded increasingly refined technologies for making paintings roughly
equivalent to actual objects and scenes, decreasing the distance between the actual and pictorial optical simulation.\textsuperscript{20} On Danto’s chronology, this stage of western art came to an end around 1905 with motion pictures. Movies directly reach the perceptual involved in seeing; the viewer does not have to infer what is going on from clues.\textsuperscript{21} With the rise of motion pictures, the conquest of appearances was attained. This marked the end of progressivism in art.

The second stage, expressionism, occurred from circa 1905 to 1964. With considerable historical brashness, Danto chooses a specific year for its end, 1964, because that was the year that Andy Warhol held one of his first major exhibitions at the Stable Gallery in NYC.\textsuperscript{19} After the rise of cinematography, painters and sculptors began asking what was left for them to do. A new theory of art was required, and indeed a new theory emerged in the form of the expressionist theory of Benedetto Croce and later R.G. Collingwood.\textsuperscript{23} Art is about expressing the inner life of humans, especially feelings. The theorists of expressionism granted that feelings are always about or towards some external object; but the expressing of these feelings greatly affects the representation of objects. When this move toward expression reached its pinnacle with Abstract Expressionism, artists claimed that their works were about objectless feelings—pure joy, or depression, or excitement. At this point “the history of art acquires a totally different structure. . . . There is no longer any reason to think of art as having a progressive history: there is simply not the possibility of a developmental sequence with the concept of expression as there is with the concept of mimetic representation.”\textsuperscript{24} Thus the history of art “sunders into a sequence of individual acts, one after another.”\textsuperscript{25} “The history of art is just the lives of artists, one after another.”\textsuperscript{26}

This brings Danto to the third phase in the history of art, the end of art. Here he appeals to Hegel’s notion that the goal of history is the complete self-consciousness, the self-reflexivity of Spirit. Danto’s secularization and demythologizing of this Hegelian theme is that art, in this last phase, has become completely absorbed with reflection on its own nature.

The [art] objects approach zero as their theory approaches infinity, so that virtually all there is at the end is theory, art having finally become vaporized in a dazzle of pure thought upon itself, and remaining, as it were, solely as the object of its own theoretical consciousness.\textsuperscript{27}

When this happens, art has come to an end, and what we now have, again taking a cue from Hegel, is philosophy in the sense that art has become entirely self-reflexive, concerned with its own nature. It has become “thinking about art” rather than art. But Danto hastily adds:

“Of course, there will go on being art-making. But art-makers, living in what I like to call the post-historical period of art, will bring into existence works which lack the historical importance or meaning we have for a very long time come to expect [of art].”\textsuperscript{28}
SHINER’S STAGES

In his 2001 *The Invention of Art*, a reworking of Paul Oscar Kristeller’s classic “The Modern System of the Arts” of 1951, Larry Shiner offers yet another theory of stages. The first stage is “before fine art and craft.” This first stage covers most of the history of Western art, from the ancient Greeks to the early 1800s. Although this may seem to be an overly brash claim, Shiner’s point, following Kristeller, is that the making of paintings and sculpture during this long period of Western Civilization was regarded as a craft not sharply distinguishable from practicing medicine, shoemaking, stage craft, and the like. In short, there was no notion of the fine arts in the sense of the creation of artifacts whose only function is the contemplation of their elegance.

Shiner readily admits that there are many anticipations of the modern notion of the fine arts in the Middle Ages and especially in the Renaissance. Some Renaissance artists quite self-consciously strove for a new social position which would free them from the ‘ghetto of the mechanical arts.” Brunelleschi, Michelangelo, Raphael inter alia claimed that the production of art required knowledge of history, theology, mythology in addition to craft-skills and that thus artists should be classified as humanists, i.e., intellectuals.

The second of Shiner’s stages is “the great division.” This occurred in the mid-1700s and was articulated by Charles Batteux’s 1746 *Les Beaux arts reduit aun meme principle*. Batteux’s principle for setting off the fine arts from the mechanical was that the fine arts are directed at pleasure and not utility. A bit later Jean-le-Rond D’Alembert added one additional principle for setting off the fine arts from the others: the fine arts are the product of inventive genius, crafts are the product of learned rules. The main features of this great division are: (1) a sharp distinction between the fine arts and crafts; (2) the ideal of the artist as a person of special insight, imagination, genius and creativity (by contrast the craftsman follows rules and imitates techniques mechanically); (3) fine art objects are viewed for pleasure or disinterested contemplation; by contrast craft objects are for use; and (4) lastly patronage is replaced by the market system.

The third stage Shiner simply labels “beyond art and craft.” As early as the 1860s, William Morris attacked the art versus craft division. But not much movement in the overcoming of this division occurred until the 20th century and then haltingly. Photography, textile art, and ceramics are now mainstream in fine arts museums. But this movement to break down the division between artist-craftsman and objects for contemplation and objects for use has had limited success. It has, as Shiner notes, led to another new division, those who engage in crafts simply as craft, and those who create crafts as art. At the end of his book, Shiner has to admit that the old polarities still prevail. He makes a plea for overcoming them, but admits that he is not sure how this could happen.

CONCLUSION: FROM THEORIES & STAGES TO A GRAND SYNTHESIS

Danto in one of the many speculative asides which he sprinkles throughout his writings, playfully asks whether art is approaching a point where every possibility
with respect to styles has been exhausted. He envisions a matrix in which one axis would list expressionist, formalist, classicist, etc and the other would list the same. This would produce combinations such as classicist-expressionist, representative-formalist, etc. Once one ran through all of the possible combinations, the end of art has arrived. There are no other possibilities.\textsuperscript{34} The theory of art-history which I am proposing is not like this. A Hegelian flow of the history of art is an organic rather than a mechanical model. New movements fold in elements of previous movements but in this folding in, push to something new.

In this spirit of Hegel, the essentialist and stage theories discussed above can be put together into a grand theory about the nature of art. Instead of claiming, as the traditional essentialist theories do, that there is one theory about the nature of art which is true for all time and places, one can claim that art goes through phases when one position on the nature of art is emphasized more than another. Thus, for example, during the Renaissance the mimetic theory was the reigning theory. But the other dimensions of art were never entirely absent—they could hardly be and still have art. Renaissance works are often expressionist (e.g., Donatello’s \textit{Magdalen Penitent}), and obviously formal features continued to play a central role in these works. Indeed, for some artists such as Piero della Francesca, formal features played a very prominent role. Only the institutional theory doesn’t fit this Hegelian model but that is because the institutional theory is already in many respects a theory of theories. It is an attempt to construct a theory of art which includes all types of art, but its weakness is that it does not give sufficient prominence to the historical role in art.

Each of the essentialist theories and each of the stage theories brings out something about the character of art—representation, expression, form; but not all works of art contain all of these features, or the emphasis on these features varies dramatically in different works of art. What is needed for an adequate account of art is to historicize these different characteristics of art and this is what Hegel, Danto and Shiner do albeit in different ways.

The stage theories highlight the organic and historical nature of art. What constitutes art is constantly changing, but the key to the possibility of calling the widely diverse artifacts over many millennia art is the historical continuity between its many movements.

\textbf{NOTES}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid., 37.
\item Barasch, 114.
\end{enumerate}
8. Ibid.
15. Charles Karelis comments that it is not so clear whether his terms ‘symbolic,’ ‘classical,’ and ‘romantic’ are meant to express ahistorical, stylistic concepts or to be proper names for the art of particular, albeit vague, historical cultural milieu.” “Hegel’s Conception of Art: An Interpretive Essay,” in Hegel’s *Introduction to Aesthetics*. Moshe Barasch combines the two: Hegel’s three major art forms . . . correspond to the three stages of the historical unfolding of the arts.” Barasch, *Modern Theories of Art*, vol. 1 (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 182. Hegel, unlike most contemporaries, uses symbolic in a negative sense because for him expressing something symbolically means that the reference of the symbolism is grasped only indirectly and vaguely.
16. Symbolic art, for Hegel, lacks beauty because it expresses “the early artistic pantheism of the East” (Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. I, i.77/i.83-4), that is, it tries to envision God in sub-human animal forms. Indian art attempts to inflate and exaggerate the characteristics of natural objects and animals, trying therefore to “elevate their phenomenal appearance to the Idea by the diffuseness, immensity, and splendor of the formations employed” (i.76/i.83).
17. Although Hegel had no inkling of abstract art, his characterization of the highest form of Romantic art fits it quite well. Painting, the highest form of Romantic art, deals in the “abstract visible” (G.W.F. Hegel, *Die Idee un das Ideal*, ed. G. Lasson (Leipzig, 1931), 131.
21. Ibid., 11.
22. Danto’s choice of this date appears in his 1997 chapter cited above.
23. Croce’s *Estetica come scienza dell’expressione* was published in 1902; Collingwood’s *The Idea of History* in 1938.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 25. Note close connection here, which Danto observes, between the way we define or theorize about the nature of art and the way we think of the history of art. For Danto, this explains, in part at least, why the history of art in the 20th century has been a “dazzling succession of art-movements” (29). The imperative of art in the 20th century was that each artist must make an art-historical period.
27. Ibid., 31.
28. Ibid.
31. Shiner, 225.
32. Ibid., 269.
33. Ibid., 282.
ART MUST BE

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All Art must be Contemporary! Glows through neon lights high on the front wall of Boston Museum of Arts’ Linde Gallery. Such words convey the notion that art must speak to the critical issues of its time and in doing so will find relevancy in the contemporary world. In short, the artist who creates from the truths of his generation will bring insight forward to speak with significance and accessibility to his audience. Whatever form it takes, art then is a conversation with an audience that is responsive to its language, be it performance in music, dance, theatre or body, be it visual or auditory or text based in literature or poetry, or media based where art crosses over from public space into private space. If “conversation” and “language” are the essential nouns in this author’s definitions on of art, “compelling” and “coherent” and “accessible” are their adjectives. With such articulation art breathes in the contemporary world by making a connection with the viewer. Now the viewer validates work, giving it pulse, breath and meaning. What makes it contemporary is the viewer’s interpretation, presented in shifting contexts as the meaning unfolds in real time. This paper seeks to speak of where the creative activity we choose to call art comes from, where it lives now and speculate on where it is going. That is all we have, speculation about how it will speak in the future, of what issues it will address and of what language it will use.

In a recent article, the art critic Sebastian Smee invokes Theodore Adorno’s postmodern interpretation of the avant-garde cry of the 19th C “art for art’s sake” in which the philosopher meant to recover its validity from the derision of late 20th C and 21st C art critiques, who understood this to mean that art does not have to have a “reason,” for being other than to please its maker. Countering this, Adorno roots the invention of the phrase “art for arts’ sake” in the insight of the emerging new French artists of in the mid 19th C whose pronouncement meant to protect not just art, but our inner lives from what he called instrumentalism. He writes that only what exists for its own sake, without regard for those it is supposed to please, can fulfill its human end. ¹ Smee reminds us that the phrase actually arose as an expression of resistance to the control exercised by churches, governments, and political movements, which in the 19th century permeated the creation and reception of art at every level. In this light Smee holds these words as an ideal that honored and trusted our ability to find purpose for ourselves.

Whether over used slogan or aesthetic banner, “art for art’s sake” has protected our right to let our imaginations run free, to let our souls bask in beauty, to express our need to laugh and be perverse, or to meet horror with horror, or hatred with love, without having to check this against someone else’s idea of what we should think and feel. ²

In short, it reminds us to reject censorship in favor of free and autonomous vision and its expression. In the 21st Century—that is all we can do because art must continue to be.
Further, believing that art must continue to reform its conversation and create compelling language and powerfully coherent accessibility for its audience, the author suggests the work of three international artists whose aesthetic constructions offer us entry into re-visioned worlds where the past is layered atop the present and made manifest by medium, memory and matter. Each has a subtext where past existence resurfaces in new context and asserts the voice of the artist. In each case the aesthetic form is powerful, indeed empowering for the engaged audience. But in each case it can also be destabilizing, alarming, confronting, confusing. It is this creation of a dynamic between power and helplessness, courage and fear and an evocative sense of revisiting the past as a path toward an understanding and empathetic response, that these works find connection to the present.

French artist, Louise Bourgeois built hybrid home/cages from psychic yet waking memories of her childhood. It is this place of haunting childhood traumas that she explored in her series Dangereux Passages of the late 1990’s. Each “home space” is filled with furniture hanging from ceilings, mirrors installed beyond viewing range, dismembered hands, feet and ears laying on work tables or embedded on rough marble planks, glass balls precariously balanced on children’s school chairs and tapestry remnants erratically pasted on the chain link walls of these cage/houses. The largest one is made from chain link fence wire, where its form echoes the architecture of traditional Latin Cross planned churches, with the nave higher than the side aisles and a tripartite façade. The comparison of church to home and congregation to family calls up the idea of sacred places, of sanctuary, and is then mocked through an ironic double edged reference to Bourgeois’s childhood home, which by all documented accounts by the artist, was neither sacred nor safe. The viewer, encouraged to walk around the installation can only feel overwrought anxiety emanating from innate dread of a claustrophobic obstacle course whose rubble stops one from entering out of fear of tripping over emotional triggers, materialized into clumsy, eerie objects. All entry into this space is shut off (the doors do not open), only worsening the potential nightmare. Feeling overwhelmed, one might venture to one of the surrounding smaller cells to peer through larger viewing panes of leaded glass walls with lesser amounts of objects, but not lesser in provocation. The windows just bring you closer to the strange objects that remind of Surrealistic compositions, but are even more banal in their ordinariness, yet more eerie in their placement. There are balls made of transparent green glass, all the same size, perched on school chairs mean for children, locating seats for Bourgeois and her siblings who were home schooled by a nanny. As symbols of the siblings, they are as closed off from each other as planets revolving around their own distinct orbits. Is this perhaps a metaphor alluding to the inability of the brothers’ and sisters’ inability to find mutual comfort or unity within this home? Such is the quality and irony of glass, that offers clear viewing while preventing the intimacy of touch. Further, glass is fragile, it breaks if penetrated. Each ball then signifies a sibling, each set close to the other in a circle, all posed, staged and orchestrated for grown-up viewing without allowing for a child’s voice.

Dangereux Passages is then the re-visioned, memoried place of Bourgeois’s ongoing childhood psycho-drama, one that morphed into lifelong trauma. The
artist claimed that by layering these memories onto her built spaces she was able to manage an evolving agoraphobia for part of her life until it reached crippling intensity toward the end of her life. The author sees the artist’s aesthetic process as one that replicated psychoanalysis, whereby the patient, guided by a therapist uncovers deep seated fears rooted in traumatic past events, that are too uncomfortable to clearly remember and are thus pressed out of consciousness. Beneath the surface they fester, finding exit through unhealthy angst, neurosis, and in extreme cases, psychosis.

A number of the Abstract Expressionists of the New York school found kinship with Bourgeois’s self-described process of handling the past through the making of art in the present, attributing her imagery to the psychoanalytical expulsion of repressed pain. Of particular note was Jackson Pollack who used his art making action painting as part therapy for shedding his own demons ala Jungian psychotherapy. The New York Surrealists, whose studios neighbored hers, felt she was one of them and understood the body of her work as dream work (nightmarish to be most specific), the place in which they based much of their own imagery. The objects of Bourgeois’s tableaux manifested in dismembered body parts and erotica made from cloth, latex, clay, bronze, wood and whatever new synthetics were on the market. But the artist dismissed both claim, believing that the past was always a clear presence in her waking life and that she was merely documenting it. In her personal essay/memoir, From the Inside Out, she describes her creative process as one of doing, undoing, redoing.

A very different claim is made by multimedia artist, Christian Boltanski, who further references childhood as a place of his aesthetic source material, but with a major qualification about his or anyone else’s authenticity. Our childhood is the first thing in us to die, because as adults we remember fake versions. The first childhood memories are either invented or you remember stories which you were later told time and again and they become part of your family lore. In either case the exactitude of memory remains always suspect, with the only reality being the abbreviated life of all of us.

In his earliest work from the 60’s, he created short avant garde films and published notebooks in which he tried to reconcile his childhood. Attempt at Reconstitution of Objects that Belonged to Christian Boltanski between 1948 and 1954 simulated flashbacks to segments of his childhood that meshed and blurred memory with invention. Born at the end of WW II in occupied Paris to a Catholic mother and a father of Jewish Ukrainian parents, he tells how his father was forced to hide in a secret room in their home until the Liberation. As a child of survivors, Boltanski carries what Comparative Literature Professor Marianne Hirsch has coined as second generation memory or "postmemory." ” In her essay Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile, Hirsch explains that children of survivors live at a further temporal remove from the decimated world of their parents, yet the power of mourning and memory, and the rift dividing their parents lives from theirs imparts to
them something akin to memory, a recreated memory mediated not through original recollection (Boltanski was only an infant at the end of the war) but through imaginative investment and creation.\textsuperscript{5}

The artist’s work from the 70’s and 80’s focuses on the unfathomable loss of lives from that earth shattering war; so many millions lost that only an abyss of absence can express it and in that deep, deep space force the viewer’s confrontation with the awful absence of details—names, places, facts. Strange altar-like installations threaded with bare light-bulbs and wires that hang grid-like through faded photographs of faces unknown, men, women, children. Made from old discolored and often ripped photographs found throughout Europe in old shops and flea markets, most of the recovered pictures have little or nothing written on the backs. But the idea of their found whereabouts, thrown in piles of used clothing or junked as a lot, might be understood as “nuanced provocation.” They are fast disintegrating traces of what cannot be returned, pathetic vestiges of an attempt to erase huge segments of humanity through state sanctioned genocide. In these works the artist admits to his early involvement with Holocaust memory. But then quickly veers away from it, probing instead for an understanding that involved more about the loss of universal humanity each time a life finishes. In the last thirty years he has expanded into a meditation on the sense of mourning and loss of every human life, life that can only be imagined through stories, archives and art. He explains that a family buries, mourns and lights candles for only so long. By the third generation after every death there is little remembrance of great ancestors. Only the immediate are given time and thought.

So what is Boltanski’s space of provocation for the contemporary viewer? The author offers the power of the artist’s constructed altars seen in museums across the globe, but most significantly of one relatively small piece that hangs in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It is alone in a small corner of the Linde Gallery, easy to skip if you don’t know it is there. Sylvie, enigmatic and out of focus, cast in glowing naked blue light bulbs and interrupted by hanging wires, waits for the wandering visitor. Like many of Boltanski’s “rescued” photographs, the artist has doctored this one, blowing it up so that any attempt to see her face clearly, any likeness to the familiar, either in race or nationality will be met with frustration. Clarity is deliberately blocked with the intent of forcing an image that might stand in for an ethereal portrait of a soul extracted from its absent body. In this sense, the work is at once more hopeful and sadder.

Perhaps the physically shallow but charged space between viewer and image might suggest an alternative place of eternal existence, separate from living existence. The suggestion of such a possibility can only be invoked in one susceptible to such ideas, manifested through an aesthetic composition arranged with an old photograph and the ordinary entropy of a light bulb.

Finally, the artist Whitfield Lovell reifies places of slave inhabitancy of the American south of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. His multi-media vignettes and collaged stage sets are built from old broken objects and memorabilia found in flea markets and second hand stores. With some restoration and some overlaying of drawing and painting,
these are sourced triggers meant to emotionally engage a contemporary audience into their canvas of existence. The following work is a strong example of this.

Lovell’s 2002 multi-media installation, Sanctuary: The Great Dismal Swamp, conjures a place once inhabited by Maroons, ex-slaves who survived here, and those who died here in an attempt to live free. The great Dismal Swamp really exists; it is the most northern of the southern swamps that make up the boundary between Virginia and North Carolina. As one of the way stations along the Underground Railroad many refugees spent time here. The earliest one dates to 1728. By the mid 1800’s over one thousand souls had sought cover here from posses, hounds and enraged slave owners determined to recapture their property. The artist spent lots of time here in the Tidewater region, walking old paths and researching photographic and historical archives to learn as much as he could about fugitive populations who chose the swap over chains.

In 2002, Lovell transformed a large gallery space at the Center for Contemporary Art in Virginia Beach into the Great Dismal Swamp, creating what might be called a sacred site of historical recall, reconfigured through a fusion of archival memory and aesthetic response. At its center is a figure of a wood cutter who stands in back of a small pond referencing Lake Drummond which lies at the heart of the swamp’s encircling bogs.

The woodcutter is imagined, but the Lake still exists. The charcoal image on a wood panel framed by shingles that refer to the shingles and staves once harvested here recalls the triptych altarpieces of renaissance churches, and to those most connected to the facts of brutality committed here, Christ’s martyrdom. At least that is this author’s flash of connection. Treasures sunken beneath the water, but easily apparent if you look down into the large metal pail, invoke a hidden history. Axes, wedges, saws and split logs give witness to the kinds of manual industry worked at by men still enslaved as well as those who helped from clandestine hideouts, receiving food and provisions in return. The adjacent gallery opened to a darkened place, one replicating the filtered light of the swamp. Its floor was covered in thick mulch, damp leaves and cypress knees, their pungent smells mixing as they do in swamp areas. Such odors ignite on an emotional level, at once infusing and confusing human senses. In such surroundings, one asks, Is the past still present? Does it mysteriously live here? Can we enter it and step into those sodden, helpless feet and know the fear of recapture?

It was the enormous cypress trees that created a harboring effect of thickets that helped the luckier ones successfully hide their presence. Those not so lucky appear out of the walls, without feet, as soulful apparitions insistent on being remembered. Over here, I am in the water, I’m in the trees, I’ve been waiting and waiting. Painted and charcoaled feet appear inside strategically placed buckets, further inferences to so many drownings, too many watery graves. Haunted whispers invoked from visual fragments are further enhanced by taped in sounds of crickets and cicadas who live in the Great Dismal Swamp and then a more distant tapping of sounds of barking hounds that must have interrupted the former chorus, spreading fear and panic through the thickets. The visitor is then put through an experience that begins with curiosity, wonder and maybe some vestige of the original hope of those on the run,
but ends in a twinge of fright as the sounds of barking hounds gets louder and our anger at human cruelty is mixed with profound empathy for its recipients.

Ultimately, we have to ask the question about impact on the contemporary viewer-about the compelling language and emotional access to this vision. And to the two previous ones offered by Louise Bourgeois and Christian Boltanski. Do they work? Have they opened doors to past memories of which we have had no direct experience? When we are given too much information, some of it gets lost in translation, too much to process. Too little results in frustrated ambiguity and disaffected interest and the esoteric is usually too difficult to access. With regard to these three artists who construct complex, multilayered fictive spaces where historical truths meets psychological reenactment a further question posed to the viewer is whether the artist speaks broadly enough to provoke a visceral, synaesthetic response followed by an inflamed sense of empathy, no matter what narrative has reached the human heart—whether it is Louise Bourgeois’ abusive childhood, Christian Boltanski’s traumatized beginnings in a place occupied by people intent on genocide or Whitfield Lovell’s zoomed in lens of the forced horrors of slavery.

NOTES
