

On the Art Experience and the Natural Attitude

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“Delving into the depths of the human soul, [art] must then likewise 'reinworld' itself (in a concrete art form) in order to have the concrete possibility to draw people into it or, meaning the same thing, lift them up out of the natural attitude.”(Luft, 1999, p. 52)

Art has the ability to expand our horizons. Not necessarily in such a way that it provides people with knowledge that they didn't already have, but rather in such a way that it can compel people to contemplate things that they wouldn't otherwise contemplate and in ways that they wouldn't otherwise do. In other words, it has the ability to “lift us out of the natural attitude”(p. 51) as Sebastian Luft (1999) refers to it. Living in the natural attitude means to live in a state where things appear to us as we assume they are. This does not necessarily mean that we do not contemplate but rather that our contemplation of things does not go beyond our assumptions. We tend to take things at face value. But as Luft explains, this is not a bad thing. It is the “natural” way of living. It is the “basic phenomenon of everyday existence”(Luft, 1999, p. 46) that allows us to function in the world and to know that our world exists. Leaving the natural attitude is our way of re-evaluating these assumptions. To leave the natural attitude is to become aware of it. It allows us to bracket (*epoché*) what is assumed. It is important to understand that this bracketing is not a way to frame what we want to explore further, but a way to set aside that which we do not wish to explore further. By bracketing what we already assume to be true, we can direct our attention to the unknown as it presents itself rather than as we interpret it based on our previous assumptions.

In his paper “Husserl on the Artist and the Philosopher: Aesthetical and Phenomenological Attitude”, Luft provides a phenomenological explanation of “the art experience” where we leave the natural attitude, enter into the philosophical attitude and from there extend into the aesthetical attitude. Below, I have provided a brief analogy to describe this process using Magritte's famous painting of a pipe accompanied with the text “Ceci n'est pas une pipe”.

The viewer looks at the painting, disregarding the text, and thinks to herself, “It's a pipe.” The

viewer has called upon her previous assumptions concerning the object portrayed and these assumptions were not challenged, therefore the viewer is “in the natural attitude.” If she were to stop here, she will have gained little from the experience. Next, the viewer regards the text, nods in agreement and thinks, “It's not a pipe but an image of a pipe.” The viewer's previous assumptions have now been sufficiently challenged. At this point, the viewer has left “the natural attitude” and entered “the philosophical attitude” where she is capable of bracketing her assumptions concerning the object portrayed in the painting and exploring a multitude of questions that may arise. The fact that she has become aware of her assumptions and therefore “the natural attitude” means that she can not be in it. We can never be at the same time “in the natural attitude” and aware of “the natural attitude”(Luft, 1998). Her next thought might be along the lines of, “Magritte was an experienced artist and may not have needed a pipe before him to produce the image. Thus, it may even be an image of the idea of a pipe.” Now the viewer reaches a stage where she can look beyond the fact that the assemblage of colors on the canvas before her resembles a pipe and enters “the aesthetical attitude”, which does not replace the philosophical attitude but extends it, and provides her with total freedom over the way in which she experiences the painting.

The important question then, for the purposes of this essay, is this, if the person experiencing art stops at the first stage, i.e. “in the natural attitude”, has the art work sufficiently served its purpose? Other questions that arise are; Why would the person stop at the first stage and what could the artist do to compel the person to leave “the natural attitude”? These are the questions I will attempt to answer in the following paragraphs through an examination of the assumptions provided to us by popular culture within a visual-arts framework. This I will follow with an explanation of my art work, “On Everything” and how it relates to the ideas proposed in the essay.

Abstract Art Bypasses the Natural Attitude

Perhaps one of the most challenging of visual art forms that have emerged, is Abstract art. Whether it be painting, sculpture or purely conceptual, it is a challenge to comprehend as we can not

regard it with reference to any object or objects that we know. I say “we”, but am actually referring to a more general public. Through my art background, I can understand it. Seen through the experience of color-theory, composition, art history, etc. I am able to make sense of it. But to a more general public that has different and more limited assumptions concerning the afore mentioned concepts, I can understand why some would say, “My 5 year old could do that.”

Despite being challenging, Abstract art was an extremely important move in art. If we attempt to place ourselves in the times before it, the mere thought of producing a painting that didn't depict anything recognizable, would surely seem absurd, even pointless. What Abstract art did was open the field of art to a whole new world of possibilities. However, what it failed to do, was to speak to a general public. It has often been said that Abstract art is about the “essence” or “inner” qualities of something or someone. This can be put into phenomenological terms. The artist goes through a process of bracketing until he or she arrives at something that he or she regards as the true essence of the thing which then becomes the object of the painting. But, from our phenomenological point of view, is it possible for the artist to render that essence such that it can be properly or truly understood? Luft states that:

“...it is also Husserl's claim that all human activity rests on the basic phenomenon which he calls the natural attitude. Not only do all actions stem from and come forth from it, but also the philosophical and, respectively, the aesthetical attitude can only be characterized by that from which both of them radically differ, and that is, again – the natural attitude.”(Luft, 1999, p. 47)

This implies that we require the natural attitude as a sort of point of departure. In creating the piece, the artist does in fact use the natural attitude as a starting point. However, the viewer is not necessarily made aware of what this point of departure was. But the thing about Abstract art (and this is made obvious by titles such as “Untitled” and “Composition II”) is that the viewers do not need to

understand it on the artist's terms and are in fact not necessarily expected to. Viewers are expected to create their own personal understanding of it. But again, this makes it all the more challenging. To reach that state of free interpretation we must be spirited out of our natural attitude, into the philosophical attitude and finally, into the aesthetical attitude. I would argue that to do this, the work needs to speak to us in each of these attitudes. Abstract art is essentially about the art as “pure art”, painting about painting and sculpture about sculpture, and it's followers and creators are, to an uninitiated general public, often seen as an elitist bunch with a somewhat mystical knowledge not immediately understood outside of their own circles.

Abstraction Crashes as Pop art Speaks

In the words of Clement Greenberg, “...between February and May '62, [the second generation of Abstract Expressionism] was wiped out” (Greenberg, 1980, p. 2, ¶4) and replaced by Pop art which became “the second American art tendency to make an impression in Europe.”(Greenberg, 1980, p. 2, ¶4) (the first being Abstract Expressionism) Pop art was absolutely huge and it was anything but abstract. Pop artists became superstars on a scale comparable to rock stars and movie stars. Arthur Danto, the artist-turned-philosopher and later art-critic, took a special and significant interest in Pop art. His views were in stark contrast to Greenberg's who saw Pop art as art that “...has not yet produced anything that has given me, for one, pause; moved me deeply; that has challenged my taste or capacities and forced me to expand them.”(Greenberg, 2004, p. 52) Danto, on the other hand, saw it as “...the most critical art movement of the century.”(Danto, 1997, p. 122) After seeing Andy Warhol's “Brillo Box” in 1964, Danto posed the following question, “Why was it a work of art when the objects which resemble it exactly, at least under perceptual criteria, are mere things, or, at best, mere artifacts?” (Danto, 1997, p. 125)

This type of questioning led Danto to conclude that “art is dead”(Danto, 1997). Of course art wasn't really dead, but for Danto it had ceased to be what it was before and become “philosophy”.

However, due to Popart's extreme popularity with the public, we have to assume that it appealed in some way to people who were not immediately familiar with contemporary art issues. People who were not wondering what the difference was between Lichtenstein's painted cartoon scenes and actual cartoons nor whether art was art or philosophy, dead or alive. There was something else about Pop art that appealed to them. I believe that this something, was its immediate familiarity or, in other words, previously established familiarity of its content. Paintings of soup cans, cartoons and movie stars appealed to the natural attitude, the assumptions of the general public. They did so by not presenting what might be referred to as an artistic representation of a soup can but instead by using methods derived from mass-media to present a commonly assumed understanding of a soup can.

If we think back to the Magritte analogy, there is even less in a Campbell's soup can painting to compel the viewer to rise up out of the natural attitude. Therefore I find it reasonable to assume that many didn't and probably cherished the relaxing comfort of experiencing art in the natural attitude. It was likely seen by many as a refreshing change from the decades of unfathomable and foreign abstraction. Pop art almost certainly posed more of a challenge to the established art world than it did to the general public. But whereas Abstract art failed to speak to the general public, Pop art failed to whisk them out of the natural attitude.

Popular Culture Today

The work I do and the project I intend to describe in this essay, is Internet-based art. A form of art that uses the Internet not simply as a vehicle for exhibiting work, but as a method of producing art. The work is commonly created using any of a number of programming languages and is programmed in such a way that it, or components of it, rely on the Internet such that if it did not have an active connection to the Internet, the work would not exist as intended. In Internet-based art, as in other art forms, there exist various trends. However, I feel that the following passage provides an adequate, all-around description of screen-based Internet art. It is “popular, transient, expendable, mass produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous and big business” (BBC, 2006). However, this passage did

not originate as a description of Internet-based art. It is a description of Pop art written by Richard Hamilton in the mid-50's. There are various similarities between Pop art and Internet-based art. In fact, I would even go so far as to say that Internet-based art is the Pop art of our contemporary times. This is based on the fact that the Internet has become an important element in shaping contemporary popular culture. It is the epitome of mass-media and is constantly, even automatically being appropriated and "transfigured" (Danto, 1997) by artists. But the Internet does not provide a picture of contemporary culture created by media corporations as was the case for Pop art's source material. Today, the general public are the content creators. Through the proliferation of personal blogs, community-based and media-sharing websites and the open nature of it, the Internet portrays an image of contemporary culture created by contemporary culture and all of this is reflected in the art being produced on the Internet. Internet-based art is as dynamic as Internet content and as such has the ability to change and be in a constant state of becoming something other than what it is at any given moment. It is tied directly to our times, even as time progresses.

Screen-based Internet art tends to have a graphic-design like look to it. It is displayed in an unusually public fashion that allows for viewing in public spaces as well as in the intimacy of the viewer's home. Regardless of where it is viewed, what is seen is always the real thing as opposed to a reprint or a copy. People may come across it in a conscious search for art or may stumble upon it by chance. All of these factors provide Internet-based art with qualities that can allow us to combine Pop art's appeal to the natural attitude with Abstract art's appeal to the higher philosophical and aesthetical attitudes.

Speaking to Three Attitudes

"On Everything" is a work of art that looks at contemporary culture as it manifests itself on the Internet. It systematically goes through every public image available at the popular image-sharing web site Flickr.com and, via a Java applet, presents them as being actively "painted" in real-time onto the computer screen. While images are being painted a computerized voice, delivered as a live Mp3

stream, melodically reads the most recent posting from a randomly selected blog at Blogger.com.

Personal snapshots become paintings and blog-posts become melodic poetry. Images are manipulated to give them a paint-by-number appearance, a Pop art like quality that underlines their relationship to the Internet as a pop-culture phenomenon. Likewise, the blog texts are delivered in a generic, computerized voice that reflects on one hand, the assumed anonymity of people willing to share intimate experiences and thoughts with the world and on the other, the computer's lack of conscious understanding of the content it is delivering. The subject matter appeals to our natural attitude. It simply confirms what we already assume. That the world around us exists and that things are happening there.

As the work progresses, the original content of the imagery becomes abstracted by allowing areas of the painted plane to remain transparent, resulting in a seemingly random collage of partial images. Whereas being presented with a static, representative image of something that may compel the viewer to interpret it based on assumptions (i.e. in the natural attitude), the mixture of unrelated imagery is presented as a challenge to that experience that grows progressively more abstract and therefore more challenging over time. The viewer is therefore eased out of the comfort of the natural attitude and into the potential enlightenment of the philosophical attitude. While this is going on, the computerized voice constantly recites blog entries that have no relation to the imagery, abstracting the entire experience even more in an effort to compel the viewer into the aesthetical attitude where he or she is free to perceive for the sake of perceiving.

As “On Everything” works its way through the more than 140 million (at the time of this writing) images in Flickr's database, users are constantly uploading new ones. Based on my own, informal observations over a 4 day period, the number of images uploaded to Flickr in a 24 hour period is between 300 and 400 thousand. “On Everything” paints around 1200 images over a 24 hour period. According to Technorati.com, a system that tracks blogs, there are currently over 35 million blogs in existence, with about 1.2 million new entries every day (Sifry, 2006). Although the time it takes “On Everything” to recite a single entry is too variable to produce an estimated daily number, I

feel it is safe to say that it will never run out of source material. It will never reach a state of finality but always be in a state of change. “On Everything” has the potential to be about everything even though it assumes nothing itself. It unknowingly reflects everything while reflecting on nothing. To reflect upon the outcome is a task for the viewer.

Conclusion

If we accept that art's role, or rather one of them, is to encourage people to put their assumptions aside and see the world in a different way, we must also agree that it should do so equally for everyone. Not just for those who have gone through a sort of initiation into the “art world”. Pop art went a long way as far as attracting a wider audience than, for instance, Abstract Expressionism before it. However it did so by not encouraging people to put assumptions aside. It catered to a wider audience specifically by catering to their assumptions. Abstract art goes far beyond that which we assume, but in doing so, makes itself inaccessible to many.

Artists working in the field of Internet-based art have long known that there is something new about it. It has something to offer that art didn't have before but what that is isn't immediately clear. It has interaction, motion, sound, life and automation. But none of these are new to the arts. I propose that what is new about it is the afore mentioned attributes combined with the fact that it has at its fingertips an endless and infinitely varied amount of source material that is constantly updated to reflect contemporary times as well as a far larger and more varied potential audience than ever before, that is capable of viewing art in an environment that does not inhibit them.

Examination of the three attitudes in phenomenology discussed in this essay have provided a different means of understanding what previous art forms have done well and what they have not done well. It has provided me with a way to approach something that I see as problematic and to suggest a solution. If we accept that the aesthetical attitude represents the highest level of an art experience, then this is what we, the artists, should strive for and this is what “On Everything” strives for. Whether or not it does so successfully remains to be seen. I will monitor my web server logs

closely to determine the work's effectivity.

Some Lessons Learned Concerning Internet Culture

In creating “On Everything” a number of things have surprised me that I feel warrant mention. The first being the system that Flickr uses to order images in its database. They are simply numbered consecutively such that requesting the URL

http://www.flickr.com/photo_zoom.gne?id=140667888&size=m will produce an image and

http://www.flickr.com/photo_zoom.gne?id=140667889&size=m will produce the next image. An

interesting side-effect to Flickr's popularity is that it is highly unlikely that the next consecutive image will be from the same user. Even though users tend to use tools that automate the process of uploading images, there are so many users uploading at the same time that they intertwine with each other. So a batch of ten images uploaded by “user A” will be near each other but will not completely occupy the range ...23 to ...33. The growth of Flickr's popularity over the years also becomes evident as the degree of separation between a single user's images grows. For images that were uploaded two years ago, the degree of separation between such images might be 2 to 5 images whereas it might be 20 to 30 images for more recent uploads.

The thing that surprised me most about Blogger was the presence of fake blogs. These fake blogs are essentially equivalent to email spam. They are created to trick unsuspecting web “surfers” into visiting a site full of advertising or even illegitimate links used to collect information or spread viruses. My first reaction was to devise a way to bypass these blogs. But then I thought that since the idea was for the work to “look at contemporary culture as it manifests itself on the Internet”, I came to the conclusion that such web sites are very much a part of that culture and that to leave them out would give a falsely Utopian view.

* “On Everything” will be viewable online by early June at http://pallit.lhi.is/on_everything

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