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Aesthetic Cognition and Art History

Ancuta Mortu[1]

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ABSTRACT. In recent times, a heterogeneous set of institutions, such as, journals, websites, cooperative spaces of creation, peculiar galleries and museums, have been founded in order to call into question the creative boundaries between art and science. Moreover, famous artists like Eduardo Kac and Natalie Jeremijenko have also called into question these boundaries even before those institutions were founded. In addition, philosophy has also grasped the problematic by publishing academic papers in famous journals like *Leonardo*. A question arises, have the boundaries between art and science been dissolved by the artifacts of these artists? Moreover, are there actual or clear differences among traditional arts, mainstream contemporary art, and scientific and technological arts? Against standard perspectives in philosophy and history of art, I hold that some forms of scientific art are consequences of a historical process which I would like to call "defictionalization" and "demimetization" of arts. This defictionalization is, I argue, associated to the process that Lucy Lippard has called "dematerialization" of contemporary art. The defictionalization traces the boundaries among these recent forms of art by virtue of the cognitive consequences in the receptors. Naturalization and reification of our aesthetic comprehension of everyday social and physical world is a key consequence of that process. This process that contemporary art is going through, allows us to question about the nature of the latest art history and, of course, about the nature of the art criticism.

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1. Art History versus Aesthetics

A commonly held belief among a number of art historians who take positivism as their guiding principle in their effort to place the discipline on a scientific basis is that the problems addressed in art historical research are to be distinguished from aesthetic problems.[2] Moritz Thausing, for instance, advocates preserving the methodological borders of the history of art against aesthetic speculation. Here's a relevant passage:

> The history of art has nothing in common with aesthetics […], no more than natural science with metaphysics. […] It has nothing whatsoever to do with deduction or speculation: what it publishes are not aesthetic judgments, but historical facts which might then serve as a subject for inductive research. […] Art historical judgments are limited to the conditions under which a work of art was created, as these are discovered through research and autopsy (Thausing, 1873/2009, pp. 6-7).

According to positivist approaches, art history is concerned with ascertained facts – that is, historical facts such as dating, attribution or provenance, serving subsequently for inductive research that may or may not lead to broader generalizations. It is not concerned with aesthetic judgments or any

[2] I am grateful to the audience at the annual conference of the European Society for Aesthetics 2018 for helpful comments, especially to Robert Hopkins, Jakub Stejskal and Ken Wilder.

other evaluative and subjective statements. Inductivism as a privileged research method, or the view that "truth emerges in the form of generalizations based on the accumulation of [allegedly neutral] data" (Gombrich, 1973, pp. 4-5), was sharply criticized by Ernst Gombrich. He associated it with "the cult of *idola quantitatis*", that is, feeding the illusion that true research amounts to searching for facts for their own sake and to collecting *all* available data, without any subjective interference; whereas "there are no neutral data [and] we can only collect evidence if we want to bring it to bear on a particular hypothesis" (*ibid.,* p. 5; Mount, 2014, p. 27). Although he dismisses inductivism as illusory, Gombrich incidentally seems to share the positivists' skepticism about aesthetics. His skepticism is anecdotally confirmed in an essay in which he evokes his attendance to one of the annual meetings of the American Society for Aesthetics, where he confesses his suspicion that aesthetics is concerned only with "vapid generalities" and abstract "verbiage" (Gombrich, 1981, p. 336). The tacit assumption behind these views is that the history of art is necessarily tied to empirical inquiries that leave the philosophical aesthetic concerns out.

2. Process-Oriented Approaches to Art History

In contrast to positivist approaches, the hypothesis I would like to put forward is that art history reaches beyond the nature of individual artifacts and their historical conditions such as location in time and space (Summers, 2003, p. 15), and can be equally informative with respect to the very general categories of aesthetics that it is supposed to meet with skepticism. I am

referring here mostly to psychological categories related to processes involved in our response to art rather than to philosophical categories, in which traditional academic aesthetics has originally installed itself – aesthetic value, beauty, and the like –, and which were dismissed as metaphysical speculation (Kleinbauer, 1989, pp. 2-3). In other words, what I am proposing is to develop an alternative line of argument focused no longer on positivist methods in art history concerned with factual information about artworks (provenance, authenticity etc.), but on process-oriented approaches to art history, which bring to the fore the psychological foundations of art appreciation and analyze the relation between the spectator and the work of art. Further distinctions are to be made between various theories of response to works of art.

First of all, the process-oriented approaches that I will be considering are to be distinguished from reception histories (Kemp, 1998, pp. 181-182) that focus on the beholder's social, cultural and political situatedness and the way it might determine his or her appreciative response.

Process-oriented approaches are also to be distinguished from reception aesthetics that originally appeared in literary criticism in the late 1960s (Jauss, 1982, Holub, 2014), although it does manifest the same concern with respect to understanding how a work triggers appreciative response. The difference lies in that process-oriented theories rely on a notion of response which is mainly informed by cognitive psychology rather than hermeneutics and phenomenology; while reception aesthetics works with phenomenological distinctions such as the distinction between primary experience and interpretation (Jauss, 1982, p. xxix) and considers only the

hypothetical involvement of an idealized beholder, process-oriented theories rely on psychological foundational categories such as perception, memory or attention and consider the beholder as an empirical, psychological entity.

Finally, I also set aside here approaches that focus on the iconography of various states of mind; there is a very rich tradition of studies analyzing processes such as pictorial melancholy, absorption, theatricality (Klibansky et al., 1979; Fried, 1980). Such approaches, for instance that of Michael Fried's, are determined by subject matter in art and mainly provide a conception of pictorial composition rather than a conception of beholding per se.

The question that I will address in this paper is the following: what are the core aspects of aesthetic cognition that are disclosed through art historical investigation? By "aesthetic cognition" I mean a set of mental processes like perception, attention, memory or imagination that are regarded as integral to aesthetic responses. What makes attractive addressing problems of cognition in the interpretive paradigm of art history is the complexity of the objects of inquiry, namely the works of art. The various treatments of these complex sensory configurations may reveal characteristics of mental reality that have not been addressed so far, thus providing a more compelling psychology of the human mind. Unpacking the art historians' psychological assumptions in dealing with various aspects of art appreciation might bring into focus problems or categories that have been neglected in present day psychological scholarship.

3. Memory Processes and Art History

In support of the hypothesis that cognition can be included among the fundamental units of analysis in art historical research along with other units of analysis such as time, form, or style (Wood, 2000, pp. 10-11), I will narrow down my investigation to memory processes. I will be focusing on three psychologically minded art historians, namely Aby Warburg, Michael Baxandall and Svetlana Alpers, who are sensitive to issues that come from outside the proper field of art history, operating with frames of reference developed in the natural sciences (e.g., psychology or biology). What they have in common is a self-reflective propensity and a deep interest in the ways in which we can attain knowledge of our cognitive life through the arts. The writings that I will be discussing are mostly autobiographical; each of them illuminates some characteristic of memory. More specifically, they provide valuable insight into various types of memory processes understood at different levels of explanation, such as: *collective memory*, presented as a socially constituted force, operating at the unconscious, subpersonal level of individuals and orienting artistic development in particular directions; individual, *autobiographic memory*, operating at the personal level, and episodes of aesthetic response triggered by *distant recollection* and contemplation of past events, removed from the present perceptual judgment.

3.1. Collective Memory and Pictorial Representation: Warburg and the "Historical Psychology of Human Expression"

To start with Warburg, I will focus mostly on a number of notes from his notebooks that were published recently under the title *Fragmente zur Ausdruckskunde* [Basic Fragments on Expression]/*Fragments sur l'expression* (Warburg, 1888-1905/2015; Rampley, 2016). I will also refer to Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1929/2012), which refines themes already present in his notes. What we find in these writings is the outline of a project in the psychology of art, which, in turn, is considered to be integral to a general science of culture. Within the framework of this project, artworks, and images more generally, count as materials or documents of cultural history (Binswanger & Warburg, 2007, pp. 209-210). Here's a much-debated passage where the project of "a historical psychology of human expression" is introduced:

> Until now, a lack of adequate general evolutionary categories has impeded art history in placing its materials at the disposal of the – still unwritten – 'historical psychology of human expression.' [O]ur young discipline […] gropes toward an evolutionary theory of its own, somewhere between the schematisms of political history and the dogmatic faith in genius. (Warburg, as cited in Gombrich, 1999, p. 270)

The passage expresses Warburg's concern with the evolution of the discipline of art history, which can no longer be based on the established chronologies – be they "political" or "dogmatic" –, and which is in need of new periodization schemes (Gombrich, 1999, p. 275; Didi-Huberman, 2002, p. 39). The originality of the proposed approach is to connect art history with a psychology that is not ahistorical in character, a psychology that is related to a conception of time. As for the "human expression" mentioned here, it may refer to human affections, passions, inner movements of human experience and other "processes of human life" (Warburg, 1888-1905/2015, p. 40)[3]. The main reference is Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals,* a book that Warburg found and read at the National Library of Florence, in 1896 (*ibid.,* pp. 50, 292-293). What Warburg retains from Darwin's book is a biological definition of expression, where expression is defined as the exteriorization of a reflex triggered by the memory of a strong, potentially threatening stimulation (for example, the startle response when one hears a sudden noise). The psychology behind this is associationism (Gombrich, 1966/2001, pp. 39-40; 1970/2015, p. 82),

[3] On the expression of human affections, see also Aby Warburg, as cited in Matthew Rampley (2016, pp. 2-3): "I. An artwork that attempts to depict an object or process taken from human life is always the product of a compromise between the inability of the artist to lend real life to an artistic form on the one hand and, on the other, his ability to imitate nature faithfully. II. This duality is uppermost in the demands made of such a work by the spectator: on the one hand, the wish to gain a sense of the unstated presupposition that the work of art is not alive, on the other, the desire to experience the full semblance of life".

according to which strong sensorial impressions are stored in memory and retained as mental images (also called “engrams”), while faint impressions fall below the threshold of consciousness.

After having identified expression with the memory of a strong stimulation, the next step is to apply this conception to the *pictorial* representation of expression. We have seen that expression is a response to memory images; responses can be ”prior and primitive”, when they take the form of reflex movements (the startle response), but they can also be “consciously stored in pictures and signs” (Gombrich, 1970/2015, pp. 393-394). Thus pictorial representations become in turn repositories of memory, more specifically of collective memory of inner affections. Describing himself as a “psycho-historian” (Warburg, 1928-29/2011, pp. 108-109), Warburg uses images as a discovery heuristic to account for what he calls the “schizophrenia of Western civilization”; in other words, he uses images as a way of delving into the unconscious, irrational forces of human culture and putting on display its frenzied affects or more contemplative ones. The expression that Warburg is interested in is not face expression, but bodily movements expressing reactions to stimuli (for example, he evokes the Greek mythological figure of the Maenad (Saxl, 2003, p. 156) as a symbol of violent inner emotion).

The artistic representations of expression are brought together in a picture atlas entitled *Mnemosyne*, which is described in the following terms: “Its series of images will unfold the function of the prefigured classicizing nuances of expression which were used to represent the inner and outward movements of life. It will at the same time also be the foundation of a new

theory of the function of the human memory of images" (Warburg, as cited in Schoell-Glass, 2001, pp. 186-187). The project of the atlas is to make visible "pre-coined expressive values by means of the representation of life in motion" (Warburg, 1926-1929/2009, pp. 276-278). The primordial values in question are to be found in the survival or 'afterlife' of images of the antiquity in the culture of the Renaissance (Warburg, 1912/2015, p. 216), although Warburg's approach goes beyond analyzing the migration of symbols or pictorial motifs across space and time. Warburg's interest lies rather in looking for the roots of human affections (Ghelardi, 2011, pp. 11-12), in bringing into focus patterns of affective reactions. This idea is illustrated for instance by the Panel 75 of the Mnemosyne atlas (Warburg, 1929/2012, p. 180), which brings together various inquiries into the anatomy of the human soul. Among other things, the panel presents scenes of anatomy painted by Rembrandt – *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* and *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Deijman* – and representations of Hippocrates visiting Democritus – a physician therefore, visiting a philosopher deemed to have lost his wits. The corpus of representations on which Warburg relies in his various writings is vast and heterogeneous (Recht, 2012, p. 42), expanding from the Florentine archives and Edouard Manet's paintings, to ritual performances of Pueblo Indians of New Mexico. The atlas is part of a larger enterprise of assembling "documents relating to the psychology of human expression" (Warburg, as cited in Gombrich, 1970/2015, p. 393), which will culminate with the creation of the Warburg Institute Library (*Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg*), now based in London. The library's aim is to answer questions such as: "how did

human and pictorial expression originate; what are the feelings or points of view, conscious or unconscious, under which they are stored in the archives of memory? Are there laws to govern their formation or re-emergence?" (*ibid.,* p. 393)

Hence Warburg's first thesis on the psychology of art, which holds, if my understanding is correct, that memory traces are enclosed unconsciously in the artwork: "The memory image of general dynamic states with which the new impression becomes associated later on becomes the idealizing contour which is unconsciously projected in creating the work of art" (Warburg, 1888-1905/2015, p. 178; Gombrich, 1970/2015, p. 353). According to this view, memory imagery becomes literally picture-like. In creating the work of art, new sensory impressions and memory images of past sensory impressions become interwoven, giving rise to 'an idealizing contour', 'idealizing' because there is more to the artwork than mere perceptual stimulation (Gombrich, 1970/2015, p. 95). Several questions arise when reading this thesis: assuming that there are similarities between memory images and their unconscious projection in pictorial representation, how could we discern one from the other, how could we avoid mistaking one for the other, can we perceive through remembering, while remembering, that is, while retrieving memory traces in the pictorial representations? An objection might be that instead of triggering memory, pictorial representations just yield another perceptual experience.

It appears that what is at stake in Warburg's understanding of expression is the epistemological role of images, and, more generally, an epistemology of art history; the role of artworks in human cognition would

be to serve a memory function, namely, to give access to portions of reality[4] of the past. The history of art would thus provide the basis for a psychology of *collective memory,* illuminating the causal factors of the expressive culture of a given period (Müller, 2015, p. 15). Memory appears here as a socially constituted force (Recht, 2012, p. 11), operating at the unconscious, subpersonal level of individuals and orienting artistic development in particular directions.

An important question raised by Gombrich in relation to Warburg's overall theory of expression is the following: "Who is doing the expressing?"(Gombrich, 1999, p. 272) If it is a collective entity like culture, society or age is it plausible to say that such a collective entity has a mental experience?

A further question that I would like to raise is "Who is doing the remembering?" Is it the Renaissance, if we think of the Mnemosyne atlas, is it the biological organism, is it the social organism or some other entity? The primitive bodily experiences to which Warburg alludes are not experienced at first hand, they are not first-person experiences; here's another elliptical passage from his notebooks in support of this idea:

> Art = the act of reproducing a particular memory image of the social organism (Warburg, 1888-1905/2015, p. 144).

[4] See Warburg's second thesis on the psychology of art: "In autonomous and monumental art the artistic manipulation of additional dynamizing forms evolves from dynamic images of individual situations which were originally seen in reality". (Warburg, 1888-1905/2015, p. 178-179 ; Gombrich, 1970/2015, p. 353)

> Visual art: memory of a picture presenting a condition that we did not experience
> Artist: unfamiliar images fixed as if they were experienced at first hand
> Public: reflex movement with no differentiation (*ibid.,* p. 134).

Is then Warburg's account of artistic appreciation experiential? Is it about experience at all, about experiencing the world through pictorial representation? Are the primitive memories he refers to recruited in experiencing the artworks? And what exactly happens when we do experience these pictures that seem engrossed with human affections? Warburg remains silent on these questions. What he does say about aesthetic appreciation and about the spectator's experience of the work of art is that capturing the individual or collective inner affections enclosed in the pictorial representation requires education; a poorly educated spectator will only pay attention to "general qualities" such as subject-matter (*ibid.,* p. 98). In his later writings, he will sharply criticize the "hedonistic aesthetes [who] win the cheap approval of the art-loving public when they explain such formal changes in terms of pleasure in the extended decorative line" (Warburg, 1926-1929/2009, p. 278). To such doctrines relying on the pleasures formal contemplation, Warburg opposes an aesthetics based in the psychology and physiology of human beings: "Let anyone who wishes content themselves with the flora of the most beautiful and aromatic plants; this will never, however, develop into a physiology of the circulating, rising sap of plants, for this only reveals itself to whoever examines the

subterranean roots of life" (*ibid.,* p. 278). A further passage presents aesthetic concerns as sterile verbiage: "I had acquired an honest disgust of aestheticizing art history. The formal approach to the image – devoid of understanding of its biological necessity as a product between religion and art - … appeared to me to lead merely to barren word-mongering" (Warburg, as cited in Gombrich, 1970/2015, p. 354). These passages reflect the same tension between aesthetics and art history that I have mentioned at the beginning of my paper. By expressing his feeling of "disgust of aestheticizing art history", Warburg targets more specifically a traditional conception of aesthetics understood as a doctrine of beauty.

3.2. Autobiographic Memory: Baxandall and Alpers

Further examples of art historical developments that are psychologically informed could serve to illuminate the experiential component of memory; the autobiographical writings of Michael Baxandall (2010) and Svetlana Alpers (2013) are valuable sources in this respect. Here the analysis of memory is located at a personal level; memory is described as a property of consciousness and no longer, more generally, as a property of biological organisms or collective entities.

Asked whether we can still learn anything from Warburg in relation to memory, Baxandall answers that "it would be a matter of the limitations of memory; [that] what one can retrieve is very little and very crude. That is one thing that comes out of Warburg's work on the use of classical motif in later art" (Obrist, 2008, p. 47). In this respect, the difficulty to recognize as

genuine the survival of patterns and motifs in the pictorial representations of different cultures and epochs would reflect a limitation of memory, which is prone to deprive the original impressions of their strength. Instead of drawing on iconographic material as Warburg did, Baxandall appeals to the evoked image of a sand dune in an attempt to capture that shape of memory that would make manifest its elusive character. He characterizes memory as “a sanded down thing” (Obrist, 2008, p. 42), while working on a book that will eventually be published posthumously under the title *Episodes*. The thought developed in Baxandall’s book is that memories summoned up through deliberate recall would arrange themselves in a way that parallels the arranging of the grains of a sand dune as wind flows. The sand dune is meant to illustrate “some properties of the consciousness itself” such as its “continuous but changing” nature (1), a “unitary structure” (2), its capacity to preserve traces of its own history (3), “firmness and stability” (4), responsiveness to external factors (5) as well as self-reflexivity (6) (Baxandall, 2010, p. 20).

Several characteristics of memory resurface through this analogy of the sand dune:

- memories from past experience undergo a number of transformations in the retrieval process which prevent them from being preserved as fixed traces like in some photo archive of the past;

- they are not scattered fragments but are embedded in a unitary structure, such as the unity of consciousness;

- they act upon present states (for instance categorization), possibly improving them (*ibid.,* p. 20-21);

-as for the character of reflexiveness, which may serve to secure a sense of the self, it is further described as a feedback loop : while the self constructs memories by choosing to retain only a small portion of the profusion of data, the act of remembering affects in turn the sense of the self, reinforcing it:

> For the sense of the self what seems crucial here is the reflexiveness of the process. […] A sand dune is repeatedly reshaped by wind but that wind is partly re-directed on itself by the shape of the dune: in turn, that shape has partly been produced by previous experience of wind. The agent in remembering must be partly an incremental product of the object of the act of remembering. The consciousness would have a character deriving partly from its past experience, and *a* particular memory would be an act of construction by an experienced consciousness, now. The construction depends first on the selection of cues that have been retained, which it then develops within dispositions that are partly acquired. Many of the liveliest memories from our earlier lives are likely to be those we have used to explain ourselves to ourselves – even though we may no longer use them immediately in this way. (*ibid.,* p. 30)

With this analogy between the act of remembering and a sand dune, Baxandall offers a creative account of the individual, *autobiographic memory*, namely an account that acknowledges the active presence of memories in current mental states.

Svetlana Alpers continues Baxandall's line of questioning regarding

subjective states of mind. In addition to variations on the topic of looking, which lie at the core of her recent book entitled *Roof Life*, Alpers considers episodes of aesthetic response triggered by *distant recollection* and contemplation of past events. Her introspective pursuit is based on the records she kept of various events, for instance selling a Rothko painting or buying a Bonnard drawing. According to Alpers, in "taking a distant view" (Alpers, 2013, pp. 5, 71), new aspects of experience emerge. "Distance" may be understood in different ways, as a notion of:

- historical or temporal distance, when confronted to objects or events not belonging to one's time (Melville & Alpers, 2013, p. 41);
- physical distance – for instance, seeing a city skyline from a rooftop (Alpers, 2013, p. 3);
- phenomenal distance, elicited by objects or actions which instill in the observer a sense of strangeness or unfamiliarity.

Seeing things at a distance seems to be a pre-condition for aesthetic appreciation, as suggested in the following passage: "What does it take for something to strike one as a work of art? […] In my experience, it is not a matter of familiarity, but rather a matter of distance, an appearance of being strange" (*ibid.*, p. 130). Experience of loss might count as a further condition for appreciation: for instance, in evoking the selling of a Rothko painting, Alpers claims that only when she ceases to own the painting, does she become aware of it as a work of art: "After the day I saw it on its own in the storage area before it was taken away, I never set eyes on it again. But it

was under those conditions that I was able to see it for the first time. It was itself. Its distance from family and then from me, and the sense of letting go, was when it struck me as a work of art." (*ibid.*, p. 140). It is not so much the lack of possessing which enables the experience, as the distant view of oneself and of art which is made possible through letting the painting go. The importance of seeing oneself at a distance in art appreciation is confirmed when contrasting this episode with the moment Alpers sees again a Bonnard drawing and decides to purchase it:

> It had looked familiar when I caught sight of it among other Bonnard drawings in the booth. Aside from its being a Bonnard, what attracted me to this particular drawing was that I had seen and liked it before. But why that? Something reciprocal can occur – between viewer and work of art – in seeing again. Something that was lost is found and in the finding the person looking and the object, each in its own way, is confirmed: to be conscious of seeing a work of art again it is to recover the self who had looked at it. And the object is still there, proving it still exists. Being revisitable sets something apart. One has the clarity gained from a distant view of oneself and of art. It is another instance of "the shock of sight", and, in my experience, loss or separation is part of it, always lurking in the wings. (*ibid.,* p. 153)

The passage suggests that in the acts of remembering or seeing again, both self and art appear to undergo a process of re-vision. It would be interesting to compare these insights with psychological empirical findings and see to what extent personal memories and art appreciation are intertwined.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have pointed to particular art historical approaches that might advance the contemporary debates on the cognitive processes engaged in the appreciation of art. Process-oriented approaches to art history provide fundamental distinctions in the realm of cognition, giving us access to different levels of psychological explanation (subpersonal, personal, transindividual etc.), while focusing the discussion on the complexities of art practices.

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