Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 7, 2015

Edited by Fabian Dorsch and Dan-Eugen Ratiu

Published by the European Society for Aesthetics

esa

Proceedings of the European Society of Aesthetics

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: http://proceedings.eurosa.org
Email: proceedings@eurosa.org
ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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The European Society for Aesthetics

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Towards Gesture as Aesthetic Strategy

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Abstract. *Towards Gesture as Aesthetic Strategy* examines the role of gesture, as an expression within; painting, installation art and architecture, respectively. This paper argues for an expanded notion of gesture, forming an intrinsic link between the incidental gesturing of the day-to-day and the considered gesturing of the artist in the creation of an artwork. By tracing the manifestation of gesture through a variety of media – the unexplored possibilities of gesture as an intuitively recognised element of aesthetic experience will be considered. Furthermore, by incorporating the interests of the authors, it is the goal of this piece to highlight gesture as a fundamental attribute of all aesthetic experience at a foundational level.

1. Introduction

Gesture, simply put, is a form of communication or expression. Within painting, we encounter gesture clearly arrested through the creative activity of the artist. Although these expressive movements are commonly acknowledged in the idiom of painting, they have a thoroughgoing influence on the aesthetic experience of all visual art forms, albeit manifested in distinctly different ways. In this paper, gesture in painting will form a point of departure to create a preliminary account of the ways gesture can also be recognised in installation art and architecture. An account of gesture in this case is more than simply a recounting of the physical movements executed by the artist in the production of a work of art. Such gestural movements are formed, and informed, by the artists' being-in-the-world. When intentionally recorded as brushstrokes or similar, such gestures are recognised by the viewer as the work of an embodied consciousness, for the edification of the same. Conventionally, gesture in the production of

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the artwork has been presented as distinct from the gesturing of the artist outside the studio, or their manner of comportment in and toward their world. We propose a reconsideration of these gestures - the movement of a brush on the canvas, the opposition of pencil and surface- as simply intentional gesturing that occurs amongst a whole range of social movements that individuals perform unintentionally, informing their manner of being-in-the-world. When rendered fixed in this way, gesturing becomes linked intrinsically to authenticity, what Crowther and Goodman have termed the 'autography' of the art work.[1] This paper is not engaged in an intentionalist analysis of gesture. Such a reading might propose gesture as an aesthetic strategy deployed by the artist as a means of manipulating the aesthetic experience afforded by the work. Rather, we intend positing the analysis of gesture as a strategic means of approaching and elucidating the experiences afforded to the spectator through various visual art forms.

The first section discusses painting as the paradigm of gesture at work, with recourse to the theories of Wollheim, Crowther and Merleau-Ponty. In particular, Crowther's argument that gesture achieves transient existence in the performance of everyday tasks, whereas in the act of drawing and painting such gesture is arrested and preserved in the finished work (Crowther, 2015, p. 50). In the second section, issues of direct autography will be explored in light of installation art, whose indeterminate form has excluded it from past discussions of gesture. Investigating the distinct position of installation works as the inalienable creations of the artist, yet often inflected by the arrangement of another, a fractional reciprocity of gesture in installation art will be posited. In the third and final section, an examination of architecture further explores the question of the autographic, arguing that where autography on the part of the creator is diminished, a communal gesturing is rendered possible. This restricted gesture on the part of the architect leads to an emancipation of gesture on the part of the viewer. We term this open reciprocity.

Before discussing each individual art form, further comment on the relationship between style and gesture is apt. In *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience,* Dufrenne argues that: 'the most authentic subjectivity is that which rejoins the universal' (Dufrenne, 1973, p. 123). All aesthetic objects share in common the circumstance of lived experience. Dufrenne states that art derives its value from the fact that it is deeply rooted in the world of human experience – the common world of coexistence. This function allows for the recognition of gesture on the part of the viewer, and while everyday gesture may contain the stylistic nuances that speak to an individual, embodied being-in-the-world, these are lost as ephemera of the everyday. In the intentional gesturing of artistic creation, style becomes arrested and, as such, distinct.

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[1] The concept of autography appears first in Goodman's *The Languages of Art* and then Crowther's *The Phenomenology of Visual Art (Even the Frame)*, where the recognition of the operations of an embodied subject speak to the authenticity of a given work of art.

2. Painting

Autography within painting is imbued with human expression as the work of a gestural process. Phenomenologically, such processes are emergent from a way of being-in-the-world. When gesture works through a physical medium onto a surface, such as paint onto a canvas, a certain finality is added to the gesture by virtue of this arrest. This system of gestures works to create the interpretive possibilities open to the viewer. They are not invited to inscribe their own gestures into the work itself and the system of gestures remains unchanged in each instantiation of the work. In essence, there is a closed reciprocity at work in painting. Merleau-Ponty clarified the close interrelation between gesture and embodiment with reference to Valery's claim that by lending his or her body to the world, the artist transforms their world into paintings (Johnson, 1993, p. 123). As a working body, the artist synthesises vision and movement. Merleau-Ponty concludes that what animates the painter is not the expression of opinions; what is of value is: 'that instant when his vision becomes gesture, when, in Cézanne's words, he: "thinks in painting" (Johnson, 1993, p. 123-4)

Crowther further develops this reading of style as emergent from the interaction between artist and world in relation to gesture. He argues that, in everyday life, the continuity of gesture is consumed in tasks carried out, whereas drawing and painting preserve it in the finished physical work (Crowther 2015, p. 110). In this reading, style is intrinsic to the processes of imagination:

> 'Style allows us to inhabit the things we imagine, and make them into

> an expression of freedom. Through all these factors, imagination is fundamental to our existence as individuals. It is not some luxury 'add-on' cognitive capacity, but rather one through which we live.' (Crowther, 2015, p. 53)

By establishing the foundational role of the imagination in the process of perception Crowther points to the share-ability of gesture and its operation on an intuitive level. Imagination allows us not only to inhabit our world in a meaningful way, but also facilitates the recognition of the gestural schema at work in painting and indeed, across a range of art forms.

As physically made artefacts, paintings indicate embodied gesture through deliberation, choice, and hesitancy. Drawing and painting transform how reality appears, creating aesthetic space (Crowther, 2015, p. 120). Chardin's *The White Tablecloth* [Figure 1], for example, evokes a soft sensuality, a slowness, a gently abandoned scene which is nuanced with tenderness. Casper David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* [Figure 2] creates a space of tranquillity, isolation and reflection. In both of these examples, such feelings are evoked by a matrix of brushstrokes, physically performed yet arrested gestures, enshrined in the canvas.

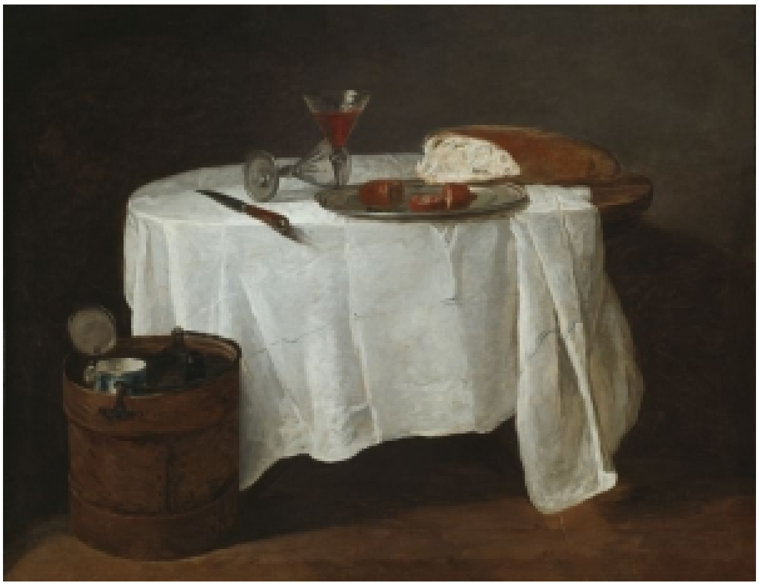

Figure 1. Jean Baptiste Simeon Chardin,
The White Tablecloth, 1731/32.

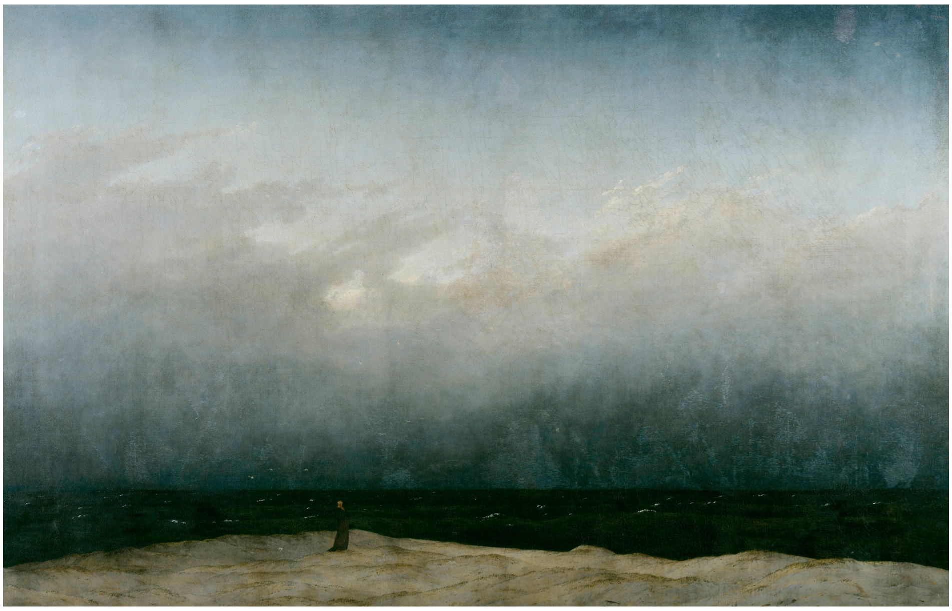

Figure 2. Caspar David Freidrich, *The Monk by The Sea*, 1808.

With paintings, the selection of the content and the style in which it is rendered allow us to share in the artist's vision to some degree. He or she offers a way of seeing – of interpreting and evaluating the visible world (Crowther, 2015, p. 120). Similarly, Merleau-Ponty asserted that: 'when a painting is successful, it will have united these separate lives, it will no longer exist in only one of them' (Johnson, 1993, p. 67-70). The identification of gesture within painting is more readily interpreted than in the instance of installation art or architecture. Gestures are arrested and confined within the canvas, an unchanging and often preserved schema to which one might return again and again.

3. Installation Art

In terms of installation art, gesture and style form a complex relationship with the embodied experience of the artwork. While the underlying gestural act of the artist is evident in the arrangement of an installation artwork within a space, the transient nature of many installation works brings the autographic element of the medium to light. Site specificity, ephemerality and re-assemblage must be taken into account in any discussion of the transient experience of installation art. The varied nature of installation art, and its means of realisation, require that an installation artwork may be arranged by the artist or assembled by an appointed other. Under these terms, the realisation of the gesture is most apparent in the concept around which the work is based. This points to the fundamental role of the imagination as a shared cognitive process in the artist and spectator's negotiation of the world. The original concept of the artwork comes from the artist's imaginative negotiation of their environment, and evolves from their experiences as an embodied agent. In encountering the work, the spectator's style of being is impacted in turn. As with painting, such gestural recognition is a product of a style of inhabiting the world, and the concept of an installation artwork is the product of the artist's gesturing. As Crowther states: 'The intrinsic significance of drawing and painting involves the relation between gesture and outcome, and not just a narrow address to formal relations' (Crowther, 2015, p. 8). This is no less significant in terms of Installation art. Concept and realisation in the form of the artwork stand in reciprocal relation to one another in creating the finished whole.

In order for the authentic embodied gesture to be realised through concept within the gallery space, the installation artist must take into account the role of the technician in re-creating the work in a new spatial context. This necessitates the evolution of an open-ended style within the work, extending and developing through space and time. For example, artist Cornelia Parker specifies that the installation of the work, *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* [Figure 3], apart from basic instructions relating to the arrangement of objects, should be reliant on the sensibility and aesthetic sense of the person overseeing it. As long as the integrity of the work is maintained, Parker allows for an intuitive interpretation to develop. The concept that is realised in the physical encounter with the work is recognisable regardless of the mode of assemblage, despite the nuances of each instantiation. The aesthetic sensitivity of the technician in this process is paramount. In order to preserve the integrity of the artist's style, the technician functions as a translator, preserving and extending the meaning of the work into new spatial and historical contexts. In this sense, installation art allows gesture a fractional reciprocity in comparison with the closed reciprocity of painting.

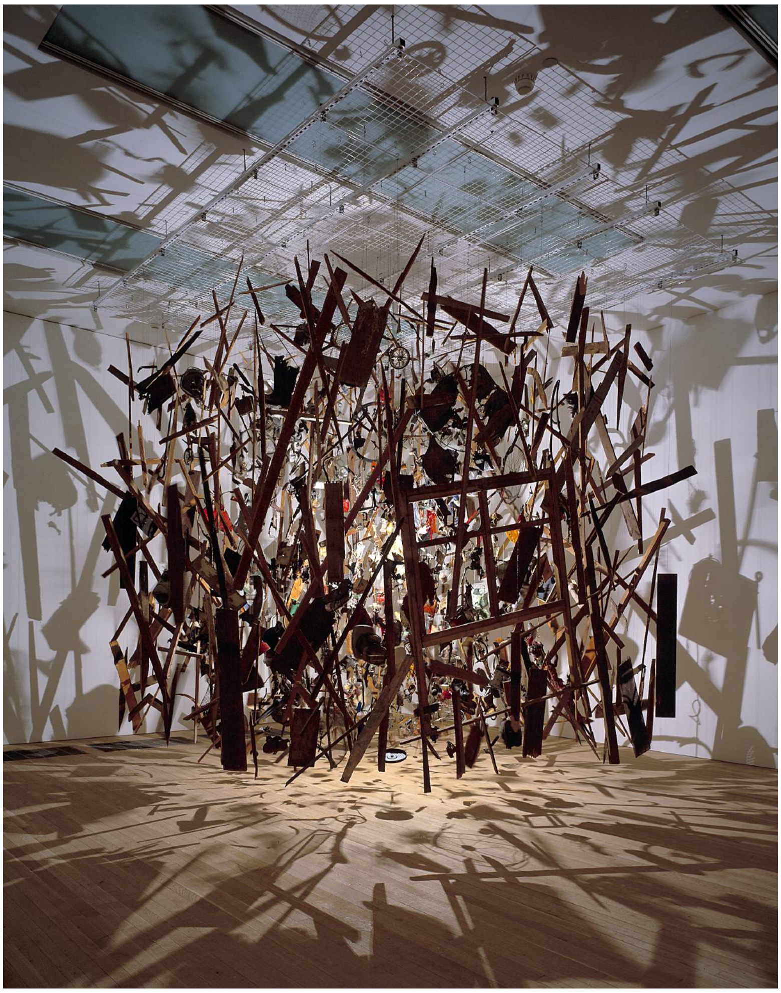

Figure 3. Cornelia Parker,
Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View, 1991.

This emancipated gesture, evolving to include the spectator's style of being, permits the spectator's experiences and gestural reflections to change in light of the experience of the work. In the case of *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, the artist highlights the importance of lighting and shadow in shaping the experience of the work. The spectator's shadows merge with the shadow of the piece, creating an immersive experience. This fluidity in relation to experience is not in any way a dilution of the original concept, however, rather it is the connection between the artist and spectator, and the fractional reciprocity that installation art allows. In light of this, Crowther's statement that, in painting, style allows us to inhabit the things we imagine, holds just as true for a range of art forms.

Although painted works may be encountered in new spatial contexts from one exhibition space to another, this process of contextual translation possesses a far less distinct impact on the experiences engendered by the work in comparison with installation art. Gestural elements within painting are static, and do not change from place to place. This is a fundamental point of departure between painting and installation art. The intuitive recognition of the hand of the artist in the spectator's embodied experience of installation artwork points to myriad possibilities of imaginatively negotiating alternate environments.

4. Architecture

Roger Scruton states that: 'through its impersonal and at the same time functional qualities architecture stands apart from the other arts' (Scruton, 2013, p. 4). In terms of a gestural analysis, when compared with the paradigm of painting, there are far weaker visual linkages between the physical activity of the individual maker and the finished work itself. Despite this, we would argue that the recognition of gesture at an intuitive level is intrinsic to the aesthetic experience afforded by architectural spaces, much like the concept at the heart of installation artworks. Where collaboration begins between spectator and canvas in the case of painting, and in the translation of the artwork from site to site in the case of installation art, collaboration is the very origin of works of architecture. Collaboration between the restrictive factors of: topography, community and vernacular results in a necessary open reciprocity of gesture in architecture. If we accept that gesture is indicative of a way or style of being-in-the-world, in the case of architecture the way or style of being-in-the-world becomes that of a given community rather than the subjectivity of the architect as creator. While gesture is less distinctly manifest than in the previous two types of art, it is emancipated for the spectator or end user to a greater degree than in the closed reciprocity, and fractional reciprocity, of painting and installation art, respectively.

In the case of architecture, the plan is the level at which the 'hand' of the architect is most apparently manifest. Like the concept in the case of installation artworks, it is here that the architect possesses most gestural autonomy. However the plan, like the concept at the heart of Parker's work, cannot completely dictate the resultant three-dimensional structure. Rasmussen states: '[The architect] sets the stage for a long, slow-moving performance which must be adaptable enough to accommodate unforeseen improvisations' (Rasmussen, 1964, p. 12). In contrast to the closed reciprocity of painting, works of architecture must re-join the gestural schema of the everyday establishing a space for their enactment. An open reciprocity in the gesturing of the creative agent is necessary to allow the work to recede into the background, in order for a space to remain functional. Wittgenstein reminds us: 'the impression one gets from good architecture is that it expresses thought and makes one want to respond with a gesture' (Wittgenstein, 1984, p. 22). When adopting gesture as an aesthetic strategy, one should not overlook the gesturing of the community of users who inscribe themselves, both consciously and unconsciously, into a given space. Expressed for example, through the graceful decay of materials in the ergonomic grooves in the bell tower steps of a gothic cathedral, or through unsanctioned graffiti tags in urban spaces. These interventions into the skin of built edifices cause them to resound with the gestural echoes of the communities that inhabit them before us. When negotiating architectural space through gestural strategy, we are invited into a twofold analysis; approaching the discreet gesture of the architect at the planning level and the overt effects of accumulated gestures of a community of history to which we belong. In the case of architecture, the gestural freedom sacrificed by the architect is manifest in the emancipated gesturing of the end user. We have termed this, open reciprocity.

5. Conclusion

The brief account of gesture as aesthetic strategy provided here is by no means exhaustive. However, it does begin to make the case for a wider conception of the role of gesture in the analysis of all art forms. Gesture begins not at the canvas, in the studio or at the drawing board, but rather it evolves from the artist's everyday negotiation of their environment as a culturally, socially and historically located subject. In broadening the definition of gesture in this way, we are able to appreciate its fundamental role in the recognition of artworks as the production of our embodied being-in-the-world. It is by virtue of this recognition of gesture that the question of the authenticity of the work with regards installation art and architecture does not become more pressing, despite the obvious levels of collaboration needed for their physical production. For example, few people would dispute *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* as being the product of the creative work of Cornelia Parker, even if the technician carries out its assembly. Likewise, in architecture, the builder, despite their technical skill is not accredited in the same manner as the architect. Despite transience, or issues of consultation, authorship on the part of the installation artist or architect is not called into question. This suggests that gesture, although most apparent in painting through its physicality, is nonetheless intuitively recognised in the case of both installation art and architecture.

In terms of understanding a conventional account of gesture in art the following quotation is instructive:

> 'An artist must fill the role of agent...but he must also fill the role of spectator. Inside each artist is a spectator upon whom the artist as agent, is dependant. And this dependence is enshrined in what is one of the few consistencies in the history of pictorial art: that is, the artists posture, or that, in the act of painting, he positions himself in front of the support, on the side of it that he is about to mark, facing it, with his eyes open and fixed upon it.' (Wollheim, 1987, p. 43)

In the case of installation art and architecture, the postural reciprocity between creator and spectator is not a constant, as has been argued by Wollheim for painting. This is perhaps why the analysis of gesture has been often limited to drawing and painting. However, despite the postural dissonance between creator and spectator in these other two art forms, in developing a broader notion of imagination and gesture, as not just aesthetically engaged faculties, but ones which fully permeate and inform our being-in-the-world; gesture is able to become a strategic tool for aesthetic analysis that sees art reunited with the social life of both artist and spectator.

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