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Volume 7, 2015

Edited by Fabian Dorsch and Dan-Eugen Ratiu

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## Table of Contents

### **Paul Crowther**

*The Need for Art, and the Aesthetics of the Self: A Copernican Turn* 1-21

### **The Aesthetics Group**

*Turn, Turn, Turn: Civic Instrumentalisation and the Promotion of  
Autonomy in Contemporary Arts Funding* 22-45

### **Gemma Argüello Manresa**

*Participatory Computer-Based Art and Distributed  
Creativity: the Case of Tactical Media* 46-67

### **Zsolt Bátori**

*Photographic Deception* 68-78

### **Alessandro Bertinotto**

*Gombrich, Danto, and the Question of Artistic Progress* 79-92

### **Stefan Bird-Pollan**

*Benjamin's Artwork Essay from a Kantian Perspective* 93-103

### **The Branch Collective**

*Towards Gesture as Aesthetic Strategy* 104-114

<b>Camille Buttingsrud</b> <i>Thinking Toes...? Proposing a Reflective Order of Embodied Self-Consciousness in the Aesthetic Subject</i>	115-123
<b>Ilinca Damian</b> <i>On What Lies Beneath the Process of Creation</i>	124-136
<b>Wiebke Deimling</b> <i>Moralism about Propaganda</i>	137-147
<b>Daniel Dohrn</b> <i>According to the Fiction: A Metaexpressivist Account</i>	148-171
<b>Damla Dönmez</b> <i>Saving 'Disinterestedness' in Environmental Aesthetics: A Defense against Berleant and Saito</i>	172-187
<b>Luis Eduardo Duarte Valverde</b> <i>Net.Art as Language Games</i>	188-196
<b>Colleen Fitzpatrick</b> <i>Empathy, Anthropomorphism and Embodiment in Vischer's Contribution to Aesthetics</i>	197-209
<b>Jane Forsey</b> <i>Form and Function: The Dependent Beauty of Design</i>	210-220
<b>James Garrison</b> <i>The Aesthetic Life of Power: Recognition and the Artwork as a Novel 'Other'</i>	221-233
<b>Aviv Reiter &amp; Ido Geiger</b> <i>Kant on Form, Function and Decoration</i>	234-245
<b>Carmen González García</b> <i>Facing the Real: Timeless Art and Performative Time</i>	246-258

<b>Nathalie Heinich</b> <i>Beyond Beauty: The Values of Art — Towards an Interdisciplinary Axiology</i>	259-263
<b>Kai-Uwe Hoffmann</b> <i>Thick Aesthetic Concepts — Neue Perspektiven</i>	264-279
<b>Gioia Laura Iannilli</b> <i>The Aesthetics of Everyday Life: Suggestions for a Reconsideration of Aesthetics in the Age of Wearable Technologies</i>	280-296
<b>Jèssica Jaques Pi</b> <i>Repenser Picasso. Le Désir Attrapé par la Queue et les Iconographies Culinaires de l’Absurde et de la Stupeur</i>	297-316
<b>Mojca Küplen</b> <i>Art and Knowledge: Kant’s Perspective</i>	317-331
<b>Iris Laner</b> <i>Science, Art, and Knowing-How: Merleau-Ponty on the Epistemic Qualities of ‘Experimental Practices’</i>	332-362
<b>Regina-Nino Mion</b> <i>The Unpredictability of the Political Effect of Art</i>	363-369
<b>Vitor Moura</b> <i>Kundry Must Die — Stage Direction and Authenticity</i>	370-390
<b>Michaela Ott</b> <i>Aesthetics as Individual Affections</i>	391-405
<b>E. L. Putnam</b> <i>‘Bring a Camera with You’: The Posthumous Collaboration of Ahmed Basiomy and Shady El Noshokaty</i>	406-415
<b>James Risser</b> <i>Sensible Knowing in Kant’s Aesthetics</i>	416-427

<b>Salvador Rubio Marco</b> <i>Philosophizing through Moving-Image Artworks: An Alternative Way Out</i>	428-438
<b>Lisa Katharin Schmalzried</b> <i>Beauty and the Sensory-Dependence-Thesis</i>	439-463
<b>Niklas Sommer</b> <i>Schiller's Interpretation of the 'Critique of the Power of Judgement' — A Proposal</i>	464-475
<b>Tak-Lap Yeung</b> <i>Hannah Arendt's Interpretation of Kant's 'Judgment' and its Difficulties</i>	476-493
<b>Elena Tavani</b> <i>Giacometti's 'Point to the Eye' and Merleau-Ponty's Painter</i>	494-511
<b>Daniel Tkatch</b> <i>Transcending Equality: Jacques Rancière and the Sublime in Politics</i>	512-528
<b>Connell Vaughan</b> <i>Authorised Defacement: Lessons from Pasquino</i>	529-551
<b>Oana Vodă</b> <i>Is Gaut's Cluster Account a Classificatory Account of Art?</i>	552-562
<b>Katarzyna Wejman</b> <i>Plot and Imagination Schemata, Metaphor and Aesthetic Idea — A Ricoeurian Interpretation of the Kantian Concept of Imagination</i>	563-578
<b>Zsófia Zvolenszky</b> <i>Artifactualism and Inadvertent Authorial Creation</i>	579-593

# ***On What Lies Beneath the Process of Creation***\*

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ABSTRACT. What the theoreticians fail to observe is that beneath the process of creation lies a conglomerate which is the source of all trouble in art theory, history and aesthetics. This conglomerate might be the result of a “collective mind”, or an “unconscious mind”, or the “unseen”, depending on whom one is asking. When creating an image, the full mental process of the artist is almost instinctive, being usually considered a monolith, and it would be fully instinctive if it weren’t for the technicalities that make the artwork understandable to its peers and contemporaries. That is where the social aspect really lies. But the whole process of “building” an image, similar to the process of interpreting it, is based on a series of principles - structures that lie deep. My presentation is an exercise of tracing elements that build up the creative act that results in the image, while analysing the works of G.W.F. Hegel, Whitney Davis, Clifford Geertz, Alfred Gell, Paul Feyerabend and others.

## **I. Introduction**

This paper deals with the problem of creativity, analysing it from two main points of view, in order to propose answers the question, “What lies beneath the process of creation?” and to make room for discussions that might lead to a better understanding of the issue. The first point of view discussed is the theoretical approach, dealing with works from the fields of semiotics, sociology or art theory that relate to this quest. The second point of view represents a deeper analysis that focuses more on insights

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\* In this paper I present very briefly the result of years of study and observations, some personal, some made on rational or scientific basis. This is a small part of a bigger research project and of my future PhD thesis. This work was supported by the project “Excellence academic routes in the doctoral and postdoctoral research – READ” co-funded from the European Social Fund through the Development of Human Resources Operational Programme 2007-2013, contract no. POSDRU/159/1.5/S/137926.

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from the art world and whether they mirror the theories currently considered influential.

The question expressed above represents a very sensitive subject for both the artists and theorists, insofar as creation and creativity and this approach analyses this process from the outside (theorists who see the phenomenon as a whole) towards the inside (the artists who are dealing with the process of creation daily and professionals who analyse this from a psychological, educational or neurological basis).

I use the term *artwork* not in relation to what is considered valuable or socially recognised as art, but as a general term defining the result of creative practice. I have structured this paper into two main parts, one being the point of view of theorists, and the other the point of view from inside the art world. The methodological approach used for this paper follows the analysis of some influential works relating to the question stated above. The next step, after analysing the key points within the discussed theoretical field, is to find how these are mirrored inside the art world. For this part I draw upon my personal experience, others' experiences or observations, and also studies from the field of neurology, psychology or educational practice. I use works from the field of art theory and aesthetics, with a clear preference for the semiotic approach, but I also search for answers given by sociologists, anthropologists, education specialists and physicians.

The preference for semiotics and for structuralism or constructivism in building the theoretical foundation of this paper is explained by the use of analytic methodology and by theorists' preference towards empirical evidence when stating their theories. When dealing with an issue like creativity that expresses itself in the most empirical way possible, one must first of all take into consideration those who make use of these informational resources.

## **2. The Process of Creation**

In order to comprehend a process, one must deal with the steps that constitute the said process. When dealing with creation, this can prove more difficult, for "creation" implies action seen as a monolith figure, difficult



to divide or organize into steps. The equation becomes even more difficult when one has to deal with artistic creation, for it implies the problem of “art”, a subject still in search for a commonly accepted definition and understanding. Most approaches within art theory and philosophy insist more on perception and reception towards visual arts and less on understanding how the artwork came to be. Still, there is literature that grasps at the act of artistic creation. In order to illustrate the problem discussed, I used works from various research domains: philosophy, anthropology, art history and theory.

The philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel provided philosophers at the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century with one of the most influential theoretical approaches towards artistic practice and the interpretation of works of art. His *Lectures on Aesthetics* were assembled from the notes from his Berlin lectures on the subject (which he gave within the 1820s, on an irregular basis) and published a few years after his death. In the introduction to this volume, he suggests three predicates to be considered when analysing a work or art:

- (1) We suppose the work of art to be no natural product, but brought to pass by means of human activity.
- (2) To be essentially made *for* man and, indeed, to be more or less borrowed from the sensuous and addressed to man’s sense.
- (3) To contain an *end*. (Harrison, 2013, 62)

We will discuss here the first predicate, which considers the artwork as being a product of man. It divides into four main ideas that analyse the act of artistic production. The first one (a) considers the artwork as a “conscious production of an external object”, a practice that can be known and learnt. If so, then an artwork can be re-made if one knows the procedures and means, a practice that makes the production of art a “formally regular and mechanical” activity. What makes the art production different from other human productions, and what makes the difference between art and “true art” is the immersion in the territory of mind, where it achieves meaning. This gives room for the second idea (b) where the artwork becomes a product of a state of inspiration and of talent and genius, the latter seen as natural elements and peculiar gifts provided to man by nature. For Hegel,

the genius is excited by an external object and “has the power of its freewill to place itself therein”. Thus, for the problem discussed at (a), the act of production and the needed mechanical skill come in second place, helping in bringing into existence in a conscious manner the work of art, as an external object. The third idea (c) starts from the idea of genius being excited by an object and thus, providing the artist with a state of inspiration. For this reason, the work of art is generally ranked below nature because of it being limited by the external appearance of nature, using it to express itself. Here Hegel makes an important observation: even though it *may* represent nature’s appearance, the artwork keeps being a product of mind, belonging to the realm of mind. And even though it is not a living object, the mind “borrows from its own inner life it is able, even on the side of external existence, to confer *permanence*”, giving the artwork an inner life. The last idea (d) takes as a starting point the artwork man-made as a creation of mind. If so, then the man must be considered “a *thinking* consciousness”, and be the main reason for the universal existence of works of art, which don’t satisfy basic needs, but higher ones and which come from man’s need of replicating their own characteristics into external objects, granting them with new meanings, belonging to the realm of mind. To conclude Hegel’s analysis of the first predicate, one can say that the work of art is created in a state of inspiration, being mainly a product of mind, using material forms and means of production to embody itself. It draws from the natural realm but it remains in the spiritual realm, the permanence given to it by its creator’s mind, making it superior to both nature - whose appearance it represents - and technical features that it encompasses.

Whitney Davis is a contemporary art historian known for his work on rock art, ancient art and also for his focus on theory and interference of art history with other humanist research areas. In 1986 he wrote, *The Origins of Image Making*, an academic paper where he takes an evolutionary view of cave paintings, which he analyses chronologically, in a semiotic manner influenced by Nelson Goodman. He observes how over time, lines became contour lines that define recognisable objects from the natural world and, after a while, colour is used to fill in the contour line (Davis, 1986, 200). This is seen spanning thousands of years. Filling the contour line with colour is important, because until this moment, the colour was used for

marking spaces with different usage and meaning. Davis considers that pictorial representation is used by man as a tool, as an extension of their vision. He considers images to have the status of objects themselves, that can and will relate to the models that led to their creation, but remain independent of those, gaining their own meaning. Image making is a highly sophisticated tool for the eye that requires artists having knowledge of what they intend to represent. He builds his analysis from artwork not towards the viewer but towards the artist's mind and intentions.

Both Hegel and Davis consider the artist's mind as the source of creation and meaning, the artwork produced as a result of developed technical skills achieved, and recognise the work of art as an external object resulted from a conscious decision. Hegel speaks of the conscious act of creation, which results in the artwork, but this is the last step in a series of actions that take place within the artist's mind, which would be the peculiarity of genius getting excited by an external object and using that appearance to create new meanings, and the reflection towards finding means of physical production. We must not forget the artist's dedication towards embodying his ideas, namely achieving the skills needed through study and having a natural gift for artistic production. Davis, even if building his argument on an empirical, scientific basis (the cave paintings) reaches conclusions similar in certain aspects with Hegel. One should note here that both of them speak of intentions of the mind as being the defining moment of artistic creation.

Is intentionality involved in the process of creation? According to Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy ([plato.stanford.edu](http://plato.stanford.edu)), "Intentionality is the power of minds to be about, to represent, or to stand for, things, properties and states of affairs" and the term comes from the Latin term *intendere*, which means "to be directed towards some goal or thing". It is used mainly for the realm of philosophy of mind and of language, but in the field of philosophy of art was approached by H.G. Gadamer who considers that the artist bears in mind a certain object (the idea of the artwork) and organizes their effort in order to give it a physical form (the actual artwork). When considering intentionality, the end - goal - is the existence of an object within the physical realm. It differs though from teleology, where the artwork's existence would have a goal, an end for the social realm, outside of its own creation. The whole process defined by

intentionality happens within the mind and is delivered in physical form within the process of creation.

Can we speak of a selection process involved in genius' excitement towards a certain external object? For this question one must take into consideration the problem of perception towards external objects and, thus, towards the differences between appearance and reality. Hegel suggests one of the limits of art is the representation of the external appearance of nature and so, art being inferior to nature at a first glance (Harrison, 2013, 63). Considering that art represents appearances, then it would be useful to know what and how these appearances come into genius's reach.

Paul Feyerabend, starts writing *The Conquest of Abundance. A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being* for his wife, but never finishes it. It was published posthumously in 1999, half of it being the edited manuscript and half of it containing unfinished works relating to the book. Feyerabend writes about perception and understanding of reality. He considers that the man can't perceive the whole abundance of it and makes use of abstraction, simplification to ignore what they cannot comprehend. If man would comprehend all the aspects of the world, man would be paralysed and unable to use all that understanding. Although seen as a blessing, this phenomenon brings a limitation of what one might call the world, in order to make sense of reality and one ends up institutionalising the said limitations, defining the world/nature/reality according to them. To illustrate this theory, Feyerabend uses multiple examples from the arts, may they be literature or painting, analysing how they depict and even help constructing a worldview.

In a similar quest (of identifying abstractions and patterns) the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss brings into this equation structuralism, a theory based on the observation of similar structures in the conception of various cultural elements which couldn't have been a result of cultural diffusion due to their remote and isolated character, or if they would be a result of diffusion this would have to be "of organic wholes" meaning that entire cultural features or representations would have to borrow "aesthetic convention, social organization and religion" (Lévi-Straus, 1974, 265). His search for patterns was made analysing artistic practices, among others. Lévi-Strauss analyses in *Structural Anthropology* an impressive amount of elements of material culture belonging to the artistic practice, from all the

corners of the world and totally different historical periods, cases in which the hypothesis of borrowings and diffusion would not explain the resemblance or patterns, due to geographical and also chronological differences (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, 246). His theory, that influenced an entire school of thought, is that there are immutable deep structures that are reflected in the conception similar practices and world-makings all around the globe, in all chronological periods.

These being said, we may consider that the Hegelian genius functions according to a set of deep structures, in order to comprehend the world and thus, it ends up depicting only appearances of the world. If so, the supposed selection process would involve a still uncharted territory lying deep inside man's mind, which manifests itself in a conscious manner.

If we are to consider that all the artworks refer to the appearances of the same nature and they might be selected on structural basis, do all men understand in the same manner a certain artwork? Understanding an artwork proved to be an even more difficult job than theorising it. There are several theories that deal with the different ways in understanding an artwork but for this paper I chose to present a few ideas from different areas of research. These ideas relate also to the process of creation and how it would interfere with the given interpretation.

The already mentioned Whitney Davis, in *Beginning the History of Art* (1993) approaches the art historians for the responsibility of creating meanings for the art object outside of its cultural boundaries and of its natural environment. He thinks that the only way to achieve an understanding of the artwork would be through a forensic interpretation, by gathering all the data available in order to reconstruct, as a puzzle, external and material aspects that influenced and led to an artwork's creation.

On the other hand, the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz considers artworks to be best understood by the world that led to their creation. One can and will understand a quattrocento painting but will not understand its aspects related to the social demands of quattrocento world and so, one will lose a certain level of understanding. He considers the artwork to be the product of a collective experience, hence the necessity of that experience for understanding. An aspect here asks for attention: he considers ideas as demanding to be made visible, to be represented.

Alfred Gell gives in *Art and Agency* (1998) an anthropological approach

of artworks and their interference with men, made on a semiotic basis. He considers art objects, artefacts, objects from the visual sphere created by man as indexes, as having no intrinsic value, just the value given by a relational context. He says art is made in order to change the world and it acts as a social agent, able to interfere with us and our perception. Also, he is one of the few believers in the innocent eye, able to be mesmerized and convinced by an artwork, no matter the cultural context

As a preliminary conclusion, we can say that the act of creation should be divided as follows: (A) deep structures of mind organize man's perception – still an uncharted territory (B) intentionality with (B1) genius being excited by an object and providing a state of inspiration, (B2) genius immersing in the object of interest and changing its meaning while preserving its external appearance, (B3) genius providing the conscious mind with a new meaning-laden object that requires physical representation (B4) artist choosing their materials and means of production accordingly, and (C) the artistic act in which the artist physically reproduces their mental representation of the object in a conscious and deliberate manner.

### **3. Inside Creatives' Mind**

The conclusions from the first part aren't a perfect fit with the reality faced by professionals of the domain of creativity. Highly studied and analysed, we can define creativity from various points of view: from its location within the human nervous system and its relation to intelligence, to its relation to mental illnesses or cognitive functions. When talking about visual arts (but also literature and music) creativity is commonly associated with mental distress or (sometimes) physical distress or a combination of both.

In *The Creating Brain. The Neuroscience of Genius* (2005), neuroscientist Nancy Andreas investigates the link between insanity and creative force. Most importantly, she starts her study with the idea of finding mental disorders only to discover that indeed, mental disorders might be there but they are not necessary for creativity to flourish. I consider this detail of being of great importance for it contains a cultural bias: the madness of artists. In a similar manner, TED talks on creativity, coming from professionals in the domain, may joke on the idea of creativity and madness, but

more on the aspect that what they intended to do was considered mad, was uncommon, was strange. On the other hand, Ken Robinson, in the most viewed TED talk, speaks about schools killing creativity by giving very little time in the curricula for enhancing such ability. Basically, the practice of arts, may they be drama, painting, creative writing, music and so on, are left out of general abilities to be developed by children and those with such abilities and desires must go to specialised schools or practice outside curricula. This enhances the bias of the artist being different, mad and an outcast.

But what do the artists say? Turning back and focusing on myself as a young, creative artist-to-be I discovered that (a) I did some things unconsciously (e.g. making all the portraits and studies of a human face resemble my face) and (b) I infatuated my artistic practice with a high awareness of me being special, unique, creative, mad. I have built an identity tied to the idea of me being different because I'm an artist and tied it to my work. I have observed and analysed these two features in many others and in the practice of more accomplished artists as well.

I believe in a certain level of intentionality in the artist's work. Even before entering art school or even thinking about art school, I was searching for technical features of different materials and how can I use them in order to draw, paint etc. In art high school, as a student specializing in *easel painting*, in order to achieve pleasing results I discovered I had to master the techniques. Later, in university, while studying for my B.A. in *fine arts restoration*, I discovered the importance of materials and the process of making the artwork and how much attention is given to it. The successful artists are the ones mastering a technique well enough to afford to experiment with new approaches. When talking with artists or when observing their work, I noticed their need for doing something. They are mesmerized by seeing the others painting, they feel the need of them painting, they miss the work in the studio and so on. They always have ideas and need them sketched, the least.

These observations provide the need for further investigation at point (C) the artistic act in which the artist physically reproduces their mental representation of the object in a conscious and deliberate manner. When the object starts being physically created, the initial (mental) sketch begins being modified constantly. The numerous sketches and physical analyses

of pictorial works show the differences between initial representation of the idea and final result. They might be small, consisting maybe in lines, colours or brushstrokes but sometimes they might be big, consisting in modified compositions, dimensions, scales. These modifications might suggest that the artist is influenced by the social demands of their epoch or their patrons. But let's not hurry into finding the responsible here. The result (artwork) unfolds bearing also unintended elements. It happens that an artist is asked about the meaning of some depicted element and they end up being as curious as the person questioning. It also happens that the critique made by theorists doesn't get close to the artist's mind, even if both of them are contemporaries, living in the same cultural context.

When requested to make an artwork with a certain subject, requested by a patron, the artists make their understanding of the subject. If more artists are requested to follow a certain subject (even a landscape and even if they are from the same generation or school – criteria considered elementary for art historians when they decide style) they end up making as many versions of the subject as they are. Usually the patron requests the services of the artist that they think is more suitable in matters of technique and style, in order to make what they bear in mind (examples of this practice are available throughout art history). The patron keeps in mind the artist's style and preferred technique and chooses according to these characteristics, in relation to what he intends to have in the end. There is a profound relationship between patron and artist in term of style, depiction and influences, but let's not forget that the artist is not a hand designed to depict what the patron can't. Usually the patron and artist agree with the artist's view and understanding of the world as seen through his art. In cases of disagreement, the artist gets to leave the patron, but not change their worldview in a massive manner.

Artists depict their ideas in a dynamic manner, susceptible to change in every moment. The change might be externally induced but even then, the artist's decision of modifying an aspect of their work is still a mental process, a conscious and deliberate decision that has to be in accordance with their internal process. Which makes the whole phenomenon of change an internal one. These aspects will modify (C) in *the dynamic process of representing a mental image in a conscious manner with informed choice on techniques, while being subject to changes concerning the appearance.*



In the end, the viewers end up seeing different things, irrelevant to what the artist intended and also irrelevant to what the patron needed to be represented. This is why their eye and senses need to be trained accordingly in the contemporary era and also, commissioned artworks were not available to all kinds of viewers until the modern era (at least for the Western world).

#### **4. Conclusions**

This paper is far from being a theory or proposing a new framework for the analysis of artistic practice. Its goal is to try to clarify the layers involved in the process of artistic creation. Far from being a work guided by inspiration solely, the artistic creation involves just as well socio-cultural aspects, technical developments and depicts general recurrences and patterns in world-making. Artistic practice and depiction helps at decoding or encoding the world and the self, being a tool for knowledge. The shift from considering art as knowledge to considering it a work of impulse and inspiration is a recent phenomenon in history. The early modern scientist still approached artistic practices as being a form of understanding the world (see Descartes, for example).

This paper should be seen as an exercise in approaching, rather than as a thesis. While deciding the development and the name of this paper, I promised things I can never give a final answer to. I do not know and maybe I will never know what lies beneath the process of creation. This paper is structured more as an exercise in seeing and tracing elements that can help interested researchers in their quest, or for clarifying their methodological approach, and less as a thesis with a final conclusion.

Further research is requested in order to clarify many aspects discussed here. The studies evoked have been presented roughly and sketchy, but there are many more works which could be discussed. I also consider essential that the artists should be involved in this research. Few studies involve their experience and dilemmas and this, I consider, is a methodological error.

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