

Art history and language: some issues

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The purpose of this volume – the first of a new series – is to offer a range of responses by philosophers and art historians to some crucial issues generated by the relationship between the art object and language in art history.

The choice of “art history” in preference to “art criticism” in this context requires comment. Stephen Bann distinguishes between the two activities: art history “follow[s] the fortunes of an object in time” whereas art criticism “provide[s] an extratemporal evaluation of that object.”¹ We might add that art history seeks to define the circumstances in which the art object was initially produced and perceived. Nor should we forget that we construct our art history from a particular stance that borrows from and contributes to a general culture. We should therefore recall that art criticism is inherent in art history. In his paper in this volume Michael Baxandall carefully employs the term “art criticism” rather than “art history,” subsuming the latter within the former.²

Some academic art historians may prefer to play down the fact of this inter-relation, for art history’s concern with historical retrieval – not with criticism – primarily sanctions it as an academic activity. As Norman Bryson points out, art criticism is generally treated as journalism.³ While we acknowledge the validity of the appraisals by Bann, Baxandall, and Bryson, we have nonetheless chosen to focus on art history as an academic discipline, rather than on art criticism as it is generally perceived. However, the arguments presented by our contributors are significant for art criticism no less than for art history.

The inextricability of criticism from art history is clear from the very first chapters of the collection. These examine the “presence” of art works. This issue also demonstrates the propinquity of art his-

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torical and philosophical interests. Some critics, like the late Peter Fuller, have argued that the art object has a distinctive presence because it signals a transcendence of quotidian life.⁴ Given “the ever-present absence of God” Fuller proposes that “art and the gamut of aesthetic experience provides the sole remaining glimmer of transcendence.” This transcendence depends on a qualitative and evaluative aspect of art, as “every aesthetic response is an act of discrimination which implies a hierarchy of taste.”⁵ And this hierarchy is the subject of philosophical justification.

While Fuller restricts himself to re-introducing the category of the “spiritual,” others are more positive about the philosophical commitments necessary to explaining the “presence” of art. In *The Philosopher on Dover Beach* Roger Scruton argues that any aesthetic experience which lacks a religious dimension remains inadequate.⁶ Similarly, George Steiner suggests that great works of art are valuable ultimately because they are “touched by the fire and the ice of God.”⁷ Both these are responses to the contemporary context in which people have questioned the legitimacy of a single canon and – in Fuller’s phrase – “shared symbolic order.”⁸ In returning to God and the ostensibly shared natural experience of humankind both authors seem to strive for the certainties of a pre-modernist perspective and order.

That regression is not our only choice. The authors of the first two chapters in this volume, Jean-François Lyotard and Stanley Rosen, have explored the nature of this transcendence in recent work, as sublimity and openness to the object.⁹ They even flirt with a religious vocabulary in their chapters here; but rather than commit themselves to a religious account to explain the “presence” of art objects, Lyotard and Rosen develop another crucial aspect of the relation between art and philosophy, examining the presence of art objects and their specifically and irreducibly visual aspect.

In “Presence” Lyotard presents his argument in the form of an allusive dialogue appropriate to the constant deferral of the object’s presence in our apprehension and reflection in language. He explains that talk of presence points in the direction of the art object, of a pre-conceptual ordering. Even though it emphasizes the particular, this visual presence of art works does not prohibit reflection or commentary. But the latter must seek out the presuppositions of an art object in and through the work itself, rather than by applying some general theory to relate this work to all others.

In “Writing and painting: the soul as hermeneut” Rosen takes up a

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similar theme. Citing Plato's *Philebus* and its two demiurges of writing and painting, he proposes that any attempt to use language hermeneutically to grasp objects will fail the painter. He draws issues from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in a particular reading to contrast the hermeneutic approach with a direct openness to the object's qualities. Only this openness guarantees the coherence of our thought and experience, he maintains;¹⁰ and his insistence on the irreducibility of painting to writing raises issues of how the two might ever be linked.

In chapter 4, "Correspondence, projective properties, and expression in the arts," Richard Wollheim develops one theory of the link between language and the art object. Some theorists find the art object interesting because it is expressive. Recently, some have argued that such expression is best understood by analogy with language and grammar (for instance, Wollheim's own *Art and its Objects*).¹¹ However, most theories of this type founder where they fail to explain how we ascribe a psychological property, such as expressiveness, to objects. In his chapter Wollheim provides a mechanism for this ascription by working out a conception of "projective properties."¹² This yields a foundation for theories of expression in the arts and, by implication, will also ground linguistic accounts of expression.

This chapter develops Wollheim's earlier work on painting, expression, and the meaningfulness of objects.¹³ His diminution of at least one crucial element of the supposed resistance of art objects to language – by explaining a relation between mind and object – is especially pertinent to the theme of this volume. The use of language to grasp the object is also Michael Baxandall's concern. In his chapter, "The Language of Art Criticism,"¹⁴ he develops a practical, art historical, response to the issue. We should bear in mind that Baxandall's analysis of art historical principles arises from specific art historical problems. His consistent attention to the art object as a physical entity (related to his past experience as a museum curator) enhances his influence among art historians. It encourages many of his colleagues to trust his theoretical judgment more readily than that of others who forbear such attention.

In his chapter Baxandall outlines his conception of the "basic facts of art critical life." These are threefold. First, the language available to those who write about art is culturally limited. Secondly, discourse on art must be demonstrative rather than descriptive, and is therefore predominantly oblique. Thirdly, the linear form of discourse is at

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odds with its object, which is perceived by scanning and resolution. Baxandall attends most closely to the second matter, analysing art critical language usage by drawing distinctions based on the various implied relationships between the maker, the object, and the beholder. He argues that nearly all this language is metaphorical, even if in many instances the original force of the metaphor has been lost.

A concern with metaphor and figurative language relates Baxandall's chapter to those which follow by Catherine Lord and José Benardete, Carl Hausman, and Richard Shiff. Clearly, the point at which language and the visual become inextricable continues to be central to the concerns of this volume. Philosophers and art historians have related interests in this matter. The quality of art which Lyotard and Rosen identified in their papers as irreducibly visual and which Wollheim made accessible to expression and language, Baxandall wants to grasp by talk of talking of art works. But he realizes that the distinctiveness of art objects – their visual interest – is not straightforwardly grasped in prosaic descriptive language. We need, then, to understand what kind of language is at issue and how it must work in ways particular to visual interest.

In their chapter, "Baxandall and Goodman," Catherine Lord and José Benardete contend that language and the visual inevitably interpenetrate because only the use of language constitutes the art object. This allows them to accept Baxandall's insight that we talk about talking about art. But they also suggest that Baxandall relies on an untenable conception of the language of art history as catachretic. They look to Nelson Goodman's theory about the *Languages of Art*¹⁵ to provide a corrective complement to Baxandall. They propose that Goodman's theory provides a successful conception of meaning that justifies ascribing relevant qualities to art objects.

Carl Hausman also considers the metaphorical nature of art historical language. In "Figurative language in art history" he argues that metaphor is inevitable in art history because works of art, as the results of creativity, are constituted of newly produced meanings. Standard language seeks descriptive precision, and must be repeatable and recognizable. Therefore it cannot fully articulate the novelty intrinsic to the art object. Because it generates new meanings, metaphorical language is peculiarly appropriate to articulating the novelty of art objects.

Talk of metaphor raises the question of what kinds of figurative language suit the language of art history. In both this chapter and his book, *Metaphor and Art*,¹⁶ Hausman relies on an interactionist theory

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of metaphor. Other kinds of figurative language may also be available to art historians. Richard Shiff examines and applies the metaphorical language of art history in an analysis of works by Cézanne in chapter 8, “Cézanne’s physicality: the politics of touch.” His emphasis is on catachresis, which he presents as an unavoidable metaphor. Some metaphors depend on substitution or comparison for their meaning; by contrast, catachresis affords no choice of this kind. For instance, as Shiff suggests, when we talk of the arm of a chair, we are not substituting “arm” for something else. This term may allude to the human arm, so some comparison is at work, but we are using it as the usual and only available term for referring to that part of a chair. In their paper, Lord and Benardete questioned the efficacy of catachresis in art history by arguing that a metaphor that dispenses with the assertion of resemblance cannot sustain a genuine predication. However, by appealing to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the ambiguity of the relationship between subject and object, self and other, touch and vision, produced by catachresis, Shiff argues that catachresis provides a means of both conceiving the construction of art objects and grasping them in language.

Shiff’s essay, then, exemplifies the catachretic language of art history. People have supposed that the issue of the relation between language and art object arises because they are absolutely distinct from each other. Shiff’s chapter, like those by Baxandall and Hausman, suggests by contrast that the search for such purity is misguided. The language of art history allows us to grasp art objects only by using technically “impure” language imbued with catachresis and metaphor. The object and language do not exist independently of each other as pure entities.

One approach that gives priority to language over “independent” art objects is central to chapter 9, “Conditions and conventions: on the disanalogy of art and language,” by David Summers. Pointing out that the terms are often conflated in art historical writing, Summers draws a clear distinction between conditions, as those factors without which any given work of art could not exist, and conventions, which he argues are closely related to understanding in linguistic terms. For Summers, conventions must be secondary to conditions. In making this distinction he argues that an understanding of conceptual images as iconic – that is, not arbitrary and depending on visual metaphors – underlies western thinking about art. Beginning with the classical account, he goes on to examine two versions of Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiology and aspects of Sir

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Ernst Gombrich's account of the psychology of the perception of art to show that a purely linguistic understanding is inadequate to art objects. The necessary lack of complete equivalence between image and referent is essential to the image's use and meaning, which is far from exhausted by recognition of the referential aspect of the image. Summers proposes that the real spatial context of the art object – the culturally specific articulation of space within which it exists – constitutes its conditions, forming the basis of the conventional construction of meaning.

If David Summers demonstrates one way in which linguistic analogies for art objects are inadequate, Andrew Harrison, in the last chapter in this volume, "A minimal syntax for the pictorial: the pictorial and the linguistic – analogies and disanalogies." demonstrates another. Harrison reaffirms the peculiarly visual quality of art objects. He argues that art objects have a specifically visual character that remains even after language has articulated all that it can, but which nonetheless can be conceived syntactically – that is, by means of a strictly limited analogy with the linguistic. This visual character prompts our distinctive interest in the art object.

A brief introductory summary far from exhausts the content of these papers. A number of other themes and issues structure and interrelate them. One issue is the extent to which art objects depend entirely on the communicative intention of the artist. Richard Wollheim's paper makes this intention crucial to the meanings of works.¹⁷ Others reject this suggestion. Andrew Harrison proposes that the meaningfulness of a work depends on syntax, which may not depend on intentions alone and may even thwart them. The artist's intention lacks authority over the object and its meaning, and communication between viewers around the object can occur because of that syntax, despite the absence of the artist's intention. David Summers's chapter develops the issue of the structure of the art object through the distinction between convention and conditions, while the role Carl Hausman ascribes to metaphor, with the linguistic structure that implies, also ruptures meaning from dependence on the artist's intention alone.

Another theme determining a number of the chapters is the cultural and social context of art. This should not be surprising in a text concerned with art history, but it is a factor that aestheticians can easily ignore for the sake of grasping a pure "aesthetic experience" abstracted from concern with context. David Summers's distinction

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between conventions and conditions seeks to make room for this historical and social contextualization. Recognizing that conditions emerge from a social and cultural context, his paper affirms the vital inter-relation between art and culture. It reminds us that we construct the conditions and conventions of our art historical analyses of works from a particular stance that *contributes to and forms* culture. Thus we may add to our conception of art history that it not only defines the circumstances in which art objects were initially produced, but also helps to determine the cultural context for our understanding of works of art. Carl Hausman implies a similar point. As art historical language is metaphorical, it generates new meanings in grasping the art object and so contributes to our construction of culture. Jean-François Lyotard and Richard Wollheim also suggest the crucial role of culture. Lyotard's sensitivity to the peculiar associations that constitute the presence of works of art (here specifically recent paintings by Valerio Adami, Shūsaku Arakawa, and Daniel Buren) locates the work in a particular psychological and cultural context, while Richard Wollheim's account of projective properties and expression allows for the conventional nature of producing and appreciating art objects.

The issues raised in this volume are also of consequence for contemporary art practice, where the relationship between philosophy, art history, and art criticism is already important. In his chapter, Andrew Harrison skeptically observes that some modern art "is virtually a form of philosophy." While some contemporary art may indeed be no more than the visual manifestation of degraded theorizing, the work of other contemporary artists can hardly be dismissed so readily. Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, for instance, are among those artists who directly examine the immanence of language in art, employing slogans in imagery apparently appropriated from advertising and proverbial truisms on electronic signboards. Such work reminds us that disciplined explorations by artists of conceptual issues, including the relationship between art object and language, have long been an avenue of inquiry as important as those trodden by academic philosophers.

Another concern of contemporary art practice is the development of means of evading the production of art objects as such. Here, again, the examination of the relationship between language and art is crucial. Most obvious among the strategies followed by artists has been the growth of performance art. A performance cannot be treated in the same terms of display and commerce as an art object. And, as

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Henry Sayre has demonstrated, issues raised by performance have been taken up in many other forms of contemporary art practice.¹⁸ There is considerable concern with the relationship of the art object to the gallery, as the principal site of display and hence definition. Two responses have been to use alternative and hence implicitly subversive sites – for instance, advertising hoardings – and to redefine the gallery as total installation space, rather than an ostensibly “natural” setting that validates objects by displaying them as art.

It seems germane to mention developments in the practice of artists, gallery curators, and critics at this juncture because they help to determine contemporary conceptions of earlier art, yet lie largely beyond the bounds of academic discourse. In spite of art training taking place within the framework of educational institutions, making, displaying, and commenting upon new art are scarcely regarded as academic activities. However, we have long become accustomed to a progressive elision of art and its commentary as artists have come to use both visual media and language, sometimes separately, though increasingly in conjunction. Furthermore, many curators hold display to be as important as textual commentary in shaping critical responses to art. In consequence, we should bear in mind that some people engaged in these activities believe that language alone, however richly figurative, will always be inadequate to the task of grasping the art object analytically, or even poetically.

We would argue, nonetheless, that art – however defined – is in some sense amenable to independent examination in language, as the chapters in this volume suggest. This is so even if the “mature inferential vocabulary in full play” favored by Michael Baxandall no longer proves adequate for all purposes. An awareness of philosophical issues may refresh the concern with the application of language to art. We hope that a philosophical approach to these issues will encourage art historians and critics to measure the meaning, accuracy, and coherence of their language, for instance, to question the reliability of concepts imported from semiology and other totemically treated terminologies. Similarly, philosophers may achieve a more accurate understanding of art historians’ struggles to reconcile visual experience with language on a day-to-day basis, often in pursuit of answering pressing but intellectually unglamorous questions concerning who made a given art object, by what means, where, and when.

The common interest of all the contributors to this volume is with applying language to the object to account for visual art fully. All who

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wish to reconsider making and criticizing art will have to face the issue of the relation of the art object to language and we are confident that the issues our contributors raise in the papers that follow are central to any such reconsideration.

NOTES

- 1 Stephen Bann, *The True Vine: On Visual Representation and the Western Tradition* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 112.
- 2 Baxandall develops this issue further in *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven and London, 1985). He sees the historical explanation of art objects as in one sense a "special taste" within art critical discourse and art history as an essentially critical endeavor (see especially pp. 135–137).
- 3 Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London, 1990), pp. 8–10.
- 4 See Peter Fuller, *Images of God: the Consolations of Lost Illusions* (London, 1985; 2nd edn, London, 1990). In several of the essays collected in *'Wonder' and other Essays: Eight Studies in Aesthetics and Neighbouring Fields* (Edinburgh, 1984), R. W. Hepburn explores transcendence in our appreciation of natural beauty and its representations.
- 5 Fuller, *Images* (1990 edn), p. xiii.
- 6 Roger Scruton, *The Philosopher on Dover Beach* (London, 1990).
- 7 George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is there Anything in What we Say?* (London, 1989), p. 223.
- 8 Fuller, *Images* (1990 edn), pp. 10–16.
- 9 See Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Différend* (Paris, 1983; English edn, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, Manchester, 1989) and Stanley Rosen, *The Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry: Studies in Ancient Thought* (New York and London, 1988).
- 10 See Rosen, *Quarrel*, chapters 1 and 10.
- 11 Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects* (New York, 1969; 2nd edn, with six supplementary essays, Cambridge, 1980).
- 12 "Projection" in this context carries echoes of Sigmund Freud's use of the term in his analysis of the Schreber case of 1911 ("Psycho-Analytical Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)", trans. Alix and James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. xii (London, 1958), pp. 3–82, especially pp. 66, 71). For Wollheim's application of it to the experience of art, see Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge, 1984), especially pp. 214–15, and also his *Painting as an Art* (Princeton, N.J., and London, 1987), especially pp. 82–85.
- 13 Notably *Painting as an Art* (see note 12).
- 14 The chapter is a revised version of an article originally published in *New Literary History* (10 [1979], pp. 453–465).

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- 15 Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis and New York, 1968; 2nd edn, Indianapolis, 1976).
- 16 Carl Hausman, *Metaphor and Art: Interactionism and Reference in the Verbal and Nonverbal Arts* (Cambridge, 1989).
- 17 Wollheim makes the same point in other writings, e.g. *Painting as an Art* (see note 12), especially on p. 96: "The spectator's experience [of the work of art] must concur with the artist's intention, but it does not have to do so through knowledge of it."
- 18 Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago and London, 1989).