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Art and the Reconfiguration of Contemporary Experience

Introduction

In his celebrated essay 'Modernity: An Incomplete Project' Jürgen Habermas addresses the issue of how aesthetic experience can be reintegrated into the life world. He observes that

Albrecht Wellmer has drawn my attention to one way that an aesthetic experience which is not framed around the experts' critical judgement of taste can have its significance altered: as soon as such an experience is used to illuminate a life-historical situation and is related to life problems, it enters into a language game which is no longer that of the aesthetic critic. The aesthetic experience then not only renews the interpretation of our needs in whose light we perceive the world. It permeates as well our cognitive significations and our normative expectations and changes the manner in which all these moments refer to one another.¹

Habermas illustrates his point by using an example from Peter Weiss's *The Aesthetics of Resistance*. Weiss describes a group of young workers in Berlin in 1937, who, though evening-classes acquire a knowledge of the general and social history of European art. Habermas notes that

Out of the resilient edifice of this objective mind, embodied in works of art which they saw again and again in the museums in Berlin, they started removing their own chips of stone, which they gathered together and reassembled in the context of their own milieu. This milieu was far removed from that of traditional education as well as from the then existing regime. These young workers went back and forth between the edifice of European art and their own milieu until they were able to illuminate both.²

Even if we interpret 'chips of stone' here in both a literal and metaphorical sense, Habermas's example is not compelling. For to steal such chips of stone (or, in the metaphorical reading) fragments of art historical knowledge and to reassemble them in a different context, is, at best, a use of art. Essentially found objects are taken from their high art context in order

¹ Jürgen Habermas 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project' included in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, Pluto Press, London 1985, pp. 3-15. This reference, p. 13.

² Habermas in Foster *ibid.* p. 13.

to yield broader existential knowledge. Why this should count as aesthetic experience is, alas, not clarified by Habermas.

The example is, nevertheless, instructive in a much broader sense, both negatively and positively. In negative terms, the strategy embodied in Habermas's example is one that prefigures the limits and ultimate failure of much conceptual art. Such art is putatively a means of wresting meaning back from the critic, and investing it in the ideas of the artist. It appears even to have a democratising function in that it allows the use of – in principle – any material, any object, all in all any means to get the artist's idea across. No 'skills' are necessary. Hence in its subversion of traditional art methods, this seems an ideal way for specific individuals, social groups, and (especially) marginalised minorities, to illuminate and declare their experiences.

Such illumination is, however, massively restricted. For whilst the activities of the Berlin workers considered by Habermas (or indeed the activities of most conceptual artists) may give the people concerned some existential fulfilment, they do no more than that. Such fulfilment is not only substantially non-aesthetic in character, but also (since it lacks an inter-subjectively valid code of articulation which would enable it to illuminate more general contexts) it is hugely localised in character. Unless the artist explains the intention and significance of the object, its meaning is unavailable. The road is thus clear for the critic to step in. And this is the supreme irony. Of *all* the artistic idioms it is conceptually based ones which affirm the hegemony of that insidious, priestly class of curators, critics, and art historians, who dominate the contemporary art scene. If such works are to illuminate the life world in a genuine objective sense, as opposed to the narrow context of their point of origination, then they require a critic to speak for them and through them.³

Now it might seem that the only alternative to this is equally unacceptable. It would involve a reversion to the traditional specialised practices of high art, and, accordingly, to modernist critical practices based on the primacy of form. However, this alternative is not inevitable.

We are led therefore to the positive implications of Habermas's example. It has two aspects. The first is that if artistic form is to be a vital element in life world experience, it must have the capacity to offer aesthetic illumination of personal and group situations. The second is the possibility that this can be achieved through the fragmentation and reconfiguration of the historical continuum. Habermas seems to see this as a more demo-

³ A sustained critique of conceptual art can be found in Chapter 8 of my *The Language of Twentieth-Century Art: A Conceptual History*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1997. See especially pp. 171-186.

cratised form of artistic activity. Indeed it can be; but it does not have to be in opposition to the more specialist critical judgement of taste. To see why this is so, I shall, in the remainder of this paper, set out the basis of a distinctive form of art practice. Its origins extend far back in to the century with the development of photomontage by Man Ray, John Heartfield and others. The essence of photomontage is to combine multiple photographs, and (sometimes) other visual material, into a single image. This can involve a simple juxtaposition of photographs, or the use of cutaway fragments of prints, in which latter case, we might justifiably speak of *photo-collage*.

There is a crucial question which must be asked about such a practice, namely does it matter that the image is derived solely from photographs taken by the artist him or herself? The verdict of history so far has been, in practical terms, no. Artists working in this idiom have, by and large, been willing to use photographs taken by both themselves and others in composing the final image. However, historical circumstances have changed. What if a form of photo-collage developed which was founded on the convention that the photo-collage should be composed exclusively from photographs taken by the artist? At first sight this might seem like an arbitrary stipulation about how photo-collage should be done. But is not. Photo-collage is, like all visual idioms, predominantly an art of spatial realisation. There is, however, also a temporal dimension, which in normal photo-collage, is scattered. We find images taken by different people combining different places and times. If all the combined photographs or fragments thereof, are, in contrast, taken by one individual, what results is a combination of places and times which are moments from the continuum of the artist's personal history. Visual aspects of events in an individual life are made into an object. We might term this form of photo-collage, accordingly, the 'event-object'. Such objects – in their conjunction of images – can be developed in a broadly surrealist idiom. However, the more the final object is composed from fragments, or from photographs disposed so as to mask their own figurative content, the more it approximates to the condition of abstract content, the more it approximates to the condition of abstract or semi-abstract painting. This painterly absorption of photography has a distinctive and remarkable ontology which achieves a kind of philosophical illumination. To show this, I will first clarify some key characteristics which the Event-Object shares with painting *qua* aesthetic object, and will then go on to outline its distinctive inflections of these characteristics.

Part One

Let me begin with some general points about the nature of the aesthetic object.⁴ To perceive the world in any terms at all involves the interaction of two mutually dependent basic cognitive capacities – understanding and imagination. In the former, sensible particulars are subsumed or discriminated under a concept or concepts. We have the basic act of cognition. This act is only made possible, however, in so far as it is informed by the imagination's powers of attention, recall, and projection. The generation of images enables us to relate an immediate object of cognition to its past, future, and possible appearances. Imagination, in other words, in conjunction with the understanding, serves to stabilise the sensible manifold and organises it as a coherent perceptual system.

Most of our perceptual judgements can be characterised as discursively rigid. They involve the application of definite concepts to definite objects on the basis of definite practical interests or physiological needs. Understanding and imagination are, in this context, tightly bound by the following of rules. However, there is one context in which their co-operation is much freer. This is in the enjoyment of aesthetic form. In such enjoyment we explore the different possibilities of structure in the way an object is made present to the senses. And if the object is an artwork, this making present involves reference to needs, desires, fantasies and values shared by both artist and audience alike by virtue of the common condition of embodied subjectivity.

The importance of this is as follows. The discursive rigidity of ordinary cognition does not come ready-made; it is *achieved* through the body's active positioning in relation to the perceptual field. Indeed, our particular cognitive acts are informed by a network of more fundamental concepts which originate in the body's movements and active manipulation of things. These concepts include figure and ground, reality, negation and limitation, and unity, plurality and totality. The enjoyment of aesthetic form is one which flows out from these. Rather than simply identifying the form as a 'this' or 'that', we explore the different possibilities of virtual structure which inform its appearance. Understanding and imagination interact with relative freedom and playfulness. They return us to the mobile origins of perception, and the very possibility of conceptualisability.

Now *qua* aesthetic form the Event-Object shares in all this. However, it does so in an especially perspicacious way. This is because of two factors.

⁴ For a full theory of the aesthetic object see Parts I and III of my *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

The first is that photographs are mechanical reproductions of visual experience; the second is that, in the Event-Object, the experiences in question are the direct causal traces of moments from a specific person's individual life history. Hence, in our aesthetic exploration of such an object, the virtual realities which it reconfigures are, in a sense, closer to actual experience than are painting or natural forms. There is a more direct and intimate link to the being of the artist. The events of seeing which the artist has actually experienced – his or her past bodily positionings – are woven into a fabric of new appearance. Painting and other visual aesthetic idioms embody this in a tacit way; the Event-Object – insofar as we know it to be composed from photographs taken by the artist – makes this thematic.

On these terms, then, whilst all aesthetic form involves the exploration of structures of appearance, the Event-Object more clearly locates the origins of this structuring – of perception itself – as a function of the individual body, its cognitive capacities, and its positioning.

Now as well as engaging this direct perceptual dimension, our responses to artifactual aesthetic forms engage what I shall call the holistic structure of experience. This consists in the fact that no single moment in a human life exists as an isolated self-subsistent atom. Any present experience is given its specific character through the reciprocal relation between what is given in that experience and a complex horizon composed of past experiences, our anticipation of future ones, and our counterfactual sense of alternative ways in which our life might have developed. The individual moment 'contains' as it were, the whole of our experience. And with each new moment of experience, the character of the horizontal whole is modified. In the passage of life each individual moment is contingent – things in the past might have happened differently and the way our future will unfold is a developing situation. However, once a moment has gone into the past it is a necessary part of what we are in the present. Remove or change any moment from a person's past then that person's present and future are also changed.

This holistic structure is one of the necessary conditions of the human mode of finite self-consciousness. It is, however, something we are rarely aware of, except in a philosophical analysis such as this, or, indirectly, through the arts – most notably through painting. Aristotle noted the fact that mimesis has an intrinsic fascination for human beings. He did not note, however, how the actual process of making is itself involved in this fascination. When the painter places brushstrokes on a surface, each new stroke is given its character not only by its own qualities but also by its relation to those which went before it and those future ones which the artist might be anticipating. Reciprocally, this horizontal whole of strokes in place and strokes

which might be made, is modified by the execution of the present stroke. Of course, areas might be painted over and reworked on the basis of this stroke, but, in that case, its significance is changed. The painting-over is a causal consequence of this decisive stroke, and serves to aesthetically relocate it.

Now the important point to note is that this process exemplifies the holistic structure of experience. This is because the making of a painting just *is* a successive series of experiences in a person's life. It embodies, and leaves the traces of a holistic structure. These traces, however, are not part of the artist's inner life; they are objectified, i.e. rendered in a publically accessible medium. This gives them a special significance. For it means that the present in which the painting is completed, is, in principle, eternalised – along with all those other moments involved in the process of making. The painting marks an episode in the artist's life which has now been brought to completion. Of course, any episode in a life can reach a culminating point, but it is then absorbed in the on-going holistic development of a person's life history. In the painting, however, the episode attains a more fully realised completion in that it is embodied in an artifact which is physically discontinuous from its creator. All the individually contingent moments which informed the work's creation are now rendered necessary – as part of the full identity of the finished work. And since the finished work exists independently of its creator, he or she and, indeed, the audience can identify reflectively with this completed structure of experience, rather than be immersed in the experiential flow of moments.

The painting also manifests the narrative structure of the experiential flow. This is because, in applying paint, the artist does so selectively. Previously executed areas can be erased or modified on the basis of the present stage of composition. Likewise in life, one comprehends and defines one's present not as the simple consequence of one past moment after another, but rather selectively as an element in an on-going narrative wherein some moments of the past are more important than another. Significantly, however, whereas much of one's past is simply forgotten – and forgetting is an *involuntary* act – the artist's erasures and reworkings are voluntary. They allow the present to regulate the past volitionally.

On these terms, then, the painting is not only an object of aesthetic pleasure in terms of its structures of appearance, it is so also – and in a much deeper way – through its completion and refinement of structures of experience. There is, however, a limitation; and, again, it consists in the fact that the painting's completion of experience is indirect. The evidence for this is manifest in the way that, historically, painting has been valued for the

messages of its figurative content, or for the beauties of its formal qualities. The aesthetic-ontological dimension which I have identified has scarcely figured in the explanation of the nature of our aesthetic responses to art. It has not been articulated as a convention of appreciation.

The Event-Object goes some way towards rectifying this lack. In juxtaposing and composing photographs and fragments thereof, it manifestly exemplifies the structures already alluded to. This is because, of course, the photographic material involves direct causal traces of the artist's experience. It is composed *wholly* from such traces. The experiential structure link is here virtually inescapable. In fact, it is taken one step further. In painting the work is composed in temporally linear terms. Even if one goes back in order to erase or rework, this 'going back' is actually metaphorical. Literally, the erasure or reworking is another stage forward in temporal terms, from the previous stages of work. In the Event-Object, however, the artist can use images from the distant past of his or her life on top of images from more recent experience. Physically, and in terms of linear time, the far past images are here more present than the more recent ones. Here, the linear time of the actual process of composition, is subverted by the formal assertiveness of material from the distant past. And again this is, in an important respect, true to the narrative structure of experience. For the present is often given its character more by events in the distant past, than it is by more recent happenstances. Even more than in painting, the temporality of the Event-Object is genuinely experiential.

We are left, then, with the following situation. The Event-Object uses photographs *as if* they were the material and means for painting. But it is not painting, and neither is it a variety of photography. Rather it forms a symbolic means of articulating experience which is inescapably photographic and inescapably painterly, but which is reducible to neither. The Event-Object is an emergent art form (in every sense) with its own distinctive properties.

Now as I mentioned earlier, the Event-Object is prefigured by developments in photomontage and photo-collage from earlier on in the century. But it has not been systematically worked as a distinctive idiom. One reason for this has been the facile progress, or, rather, lack of progress of philosophical aesthetics. A more significant reason is that historical circumstances have only now favoured its development. I shall now address this factor in my final section.

Part Two

Recent times have been characterised by a rhetoric of deconstruction which affirms such factors as the instability and transience of meaning, relativity in values, and the decentredness of the self. Now whilst it is true that there is a prevailing sensibility of fragmentation in culture, the elements in the rhetoric which I have just cited are more its surface manifestations – intellectual fashion – rather than actual truths about our mode of insertion in the world.⁵ The problem for them is that instability, relativity and decentredness, only make sense in the context of a stable spatio-temporal continuum of re-identifiable individual material items. Language is the means of re-identification in such a context, and involves those powers of understanding and imagination which I alluded to earlier.

Now, at first sight, the Event-Object as an artistic idiom seems very much of its time. This is because its very essence involves photographic fragmentation of the linear continuity of experience. However, as I showed earlier, this fragmentation manifests much deeper and more constant structures in perception and experience, to which the Event-Object gives its own distinctive inflection. Indeed, the Event-Object is also of its time in that it is not *per se* a high-art format. Anyone can cut up and reconfigure snapshots so as to create objects with the experiential structures I have described. These considerations suggest that the Event-Object would satisfy Habermas's demands of the aesthetic – that it should illuminate personal experience and situations, and not be the province of the specialist critic alone. This being said, however, it is vital to emphasise that it is not antagonistic to critical practice culture. For whilst it is an easily accessible medium, it can be refined and developed – perhaps in surprising ways. Keen-sighted critics can keep abreast of these factors, pointing out repetitions, refinements and innovations, as well performing more traditional formal appraisals. The fact that systematic pursuit of the Event-Object as an idiom is new, indeed, means that the critic is more effectively placed in order to carry out these tasks. There is less purely historical ground which has to be mastered.

Earlier on I mentioned how the Event-Object is photographic and painterly but is neither photography nor painting. It breaks down the barriers between these in a way that advances itself as a distinctive idiom, yet at the same time, illuminates photography and painting. In respect of the former, for example, whilst the symbolic form of mechanically-reproduced representation has been massively developed in the form of filmic, televisual,

⁵ For a sustained critique of Derrida's version of 'deconstruction' see Chapter One of my *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, pp. 25-39.

and video images i.e. in the direction of temporal realisation; its development in terms of static, more spatial realisation has been more restricted. The Event-Object, however moves us in just this direction. Again, through its use of painterly compositional means, it illuminates (in ways shown earlier) the experiential structures which inform the act of painting.

I am arguing, then, that the Event-Object is a more accessible medium, yet one which contributes to specialist art practice precisely through overcoming some of the boundaries between two such practices.

Let me now conclude by developing the implications of this in relation to the connection of philosophy and art. For a long time philosophers have concerned themselves with problems of definition in relation to art *per se*, its ontological properties, and the kind of experiences which we have before us. Debates on the definition of art have, I think, led us nowhere. Formalist approaches, for example, have told us very little about why aesthetic form should be so significant. Institutional definitions seek, in effect, to ratify anything which artists choose to call art – a strategy which, in effect, reduces art to mere theory or ideas whose connection with the art object only becomes manifest when explained linguistically by the artist, critic, or curator. What is lost in both approaches is an adequate account of why art has a history, why it should lend itself to so many different uses; all in all why art answers a distinctive need in human beings.

What needs to be done, I would suggest, is as follows. We need to clarify the symbolic structures of specific media, noting, in particular, the epistemic conditions of their legibility i.e. the way in which such symbolic structures acquire a communicable meaning which is not tied to accompanying explanations from the artist or critic. This means, in effect, a clarification of the possibility of effective communicative codes. By revealing the sometimes obscure or indirect epistemic conditions which sustain perception of art objects the philosopher enables these to henceforth act as an acknowledged and explicit convention of reading. He or she thus opens out the possibility of new communicative codes in art.

