

Aspects of Contemporary Art 1956-2016

Towards a Glossary

Some of the terms or descriptions used during the sessions of 'Aspects of Contemporary Art 1956-2016' could benefit from a brief attention to their specialist use. Extracts from the session titles can be a good place to start the considerations.

Physical location

When you are positioned in front of a substantial picture your physical awareness comprehends gravity, your sense of up and down. The picture relies on this positioning, is constructed and viewed accordingly. The activity of your physical location contributes to your proprioceptive experience. In technical-biological terms this experience is made active by stimuli arising from movement of organs in your body. This is made particular in art practice. When you view a painting on the wall your eye movements are usually in your habitual reading direction; for example, European language users read from left to right. This rapid but directional reading influences how and therefore what you see. In many painters' works these physical considerations are part of the facturing and thus constructional practice and contribute to enhancing your viewing experience. There are exceptions to some of what is being said here because of the facture of pictures on flat surfaces, where considerations of gravity and for that matter up and down, may not be paramount.

Abstraction

Reading through a standard dictionary might distract viewers from comprehending the multiplicity of bases for Abstraction in painting, but sometimes it helps to read through a generalised account. Here is an extract from the preface to Anna Moszynska's *Abstract Art* which should begin to assist thinking about the subject: '... abstract art exists in varying degrees and forms. Some abstract art is 'abstracted' from nature; its starting point is the 'real' world. The artist selects a form and then simplifies it until the image bears only stylised similarities to the original, or is changed almost entirely beyond recognition. This tendency has been evident in the art of many cultures throughout history, but even within the representational tradition that dominated Western art from the Renaissance, artists have always been aware of the gap between depicted image and reality, and of the artist's role in transforming perceived reality into art. It was not until the early years of the twentieth century, however, that an abstract art with no apparent connection to the external world began to emerge. This new, 'non-representational' mode provided a thorough-going challenge to the depictive tradition, governed since the Renaissance by the rules of single-point perspective, and during the course of the twentieth century it was refined and developed in a startling variety of ways.'¹

¹ Anna Moszynska. *Abstract Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1990, pp. 7-8.

‘Although a radical step forward, the extraordinary treatment of form and space[time] in the work of Picasso and Braque of 1909-11 was only part of a transformation taking place in the world at large. In the field of science, for instance, atomic theories of matter and new concepts of ... [spacetime] and energy were challenging theories accepted since Newton's day. In his Special Theory of Relativity (1905) Einstein ... [critiqued] the long-held belief that basic quantities of measurement were absolute and unvarying, by demonstrating that they depended on the relative position of the viewer. He also suggested that inert objects have energy and that 'the mass of a body is a measure of its energy content'. Although these revolutionary proposals did not gain wider currency until after the First World War, they indicate the pervasive challenge to tradition that existed in the early years of the century; and they had obvious counterparts in the field of painting.’²

Later in the book Moszynska relates matters regarding Helen Frankenthaler's painting *Mountains and Sea*. ‘On a weekend visit to New York in 1952, [the painter Morris] Louis had visited the studio of the painter Helen Frankenthaler [1928-2011] and had been inspired by her large stain painting *Mountains and Sea* (1952). ... Frankenthaler's example acted as a bridge between Jackson Pollock and the new generation of painters. Having visited Pollock's studio in East Hampton in 1951, Frankenthaler saw Pollock's black enamel house-paint 'pourings' of that year, in which the paint created matt areas where it had been absorbed into the unprimed cotton duck fabric, as well as shiny sections where it had been 'puddled'. Frankenthaler realised that the staining technique could be extended to colour and put to fully abstract use (for by this stage, Pollock was recognising his 'early images' coming through). Thus, unlike the dark, heavily puddled areas of Pollock's 1951 work, Frankenthaler's first major stain painting, *Mountains and Sea*, despite its representational overtones, has a luminosity of colour, a brilliance of light and a sensuous quality which were effected by thinning down the oil paint and allowing large areas of the light canvas to show through. The hitherto 'macho' and muscular connotations of action painting were transformed into a quieter, but effective lyricism in Frankenthaler's art. This was confirmed in later work which incorporated, as in *Eden* (1957), a greater degree of airiness, a lucidity and delicacy of colour obtained through staining and through the artist's interest in light.’³

Figuration

An alternative to Moszynska's thesis, Timothy Hyman's introduction to his idea of figuration begins: ‘To put a line around a form; to embody a vision in colour and tone; to re-create experience across a surface, equivalent to the depth and charged emotion of a lived life – for thousands of years such pictorial representations have engaged humankind. Yet in the twentieth century 'figurative painting' became an activity fraught with difficulty.

The history of twentieth-century art has often been told as a shift away from the illusionistic or representational towards the 'pure' and abstracted, structured in terms of an evolutionary sequence of 'movements': Cézanne passes the baton to Cubism, Cubism to Mondrian, Mondrian to

² Moszynska, 1990, 12-13.

³ Moszynska, 1990: 191.

American Painting ... But that linear account of what we now call modernism no longer rings true. Abstract painting was just one of the ways by which, in the face of existential uncertainty, artists renewed pictorial language.' Hyman's book proposes that he 'will be concentrating on those twentieth-century painters who took a contrary path, towards a new kind of figuration.'⁴

Situation

Aesthetic engagement in the work of many artists working after the late 1950s is contemporary with, and then subsequent to, the Situationist stance in both the confrontation with the present conditions and in its demand to produce new conditions. When the Situationist International was first formed, it had a predominantly artistic focus; emphasis was placed on concepts like unitary urbanism and psychogeography.⁵ The development of new forms of practice in painting is coincident with the use of new approaches to facture, partly made viable through the use by many artists of materials not usually associated with fine art practice. The use of sand by Georges Braque and by Winifred Nicholson, the use of house paints by Jackson Pollock, the use of hessian sacking by Alberto Burri, use of iron chloride in drawing by Joseph Beuys, his use of earth, straw, honey, fat, felt and battery chemicals in his sculpture, all contribute to inform and develop challenges to conventional practice.

The facture achieved by Cy Twombly at and after his experiences at Black Mountain College in the 1950s shows a considerable complex of existential attention and poetic endeavour that lifts the facture into a fragile and perceptively challenging production. Anselm Kiefer, following his work as a student of Joseph Beuys, developed work that both addressed his situation as an inheritor of the distress and palpable guilt that followed the holocaust in Germany and also continued to carry that attention to poetic endeavour.

Narrative

Narrative immediately implies a sequence and, often, implies part of a story. In a more substantial understanding narrative is always implicit in consciousness, even if that sequence appears to be non-linear. A useful attention to this subject was provided by Arthur C. Danto in a book that articulates this position in which he maintains that narrative structures become part of our consciousness of events in ways parallel to those in which theories of science penetrate observations in science.⁶ For example, in terms of aesthetic and philosophical attention, in the 1950s it became clear that science is a far messier, less austere, considerably more human enterprise than an earlier Positivism (for example in the work of Karl Popper) would dare to have supposed. Danto writes that Hanson's

⁴ Timothy Hyman. *The World New Made. Figurative Painting in the Twentieth Century*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2016, p.7.

⁵ Psychogeography was defined in 1955 by Guy DeBord as 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals' in 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography', *Les Lèvres Nues*, no.6, 1955.

⁶ Danto cites N.R. Hanson. *Patterns of Discovery*, 1958 (Arthur C. Danto. *Narration and Knowledge*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.)

‘point was that observation is ... 'always already'⁷ permeated by theory to the point that observers with different theories will interpret even retinally indiscriminable observations differently.’⁸ This becomes important when we realise the potential for different comprehensions from different viewers standing in front of the same painting. We all have in place specific and general expectations and assumptions: what close-viewing will involve is a new critical approach to these considerations.

Allen Fisher, January 2019

⁷ Danto acknowledges Jacques Derrida for this phrase, but does not give the reference. One of the significant concepts in Derrida’s early work in the 1960s, in the books *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology*, was the concept of the **trace**. On the surface this work can appear obscurantist, it is in fact liberational, but it takes a bit of work. Trace can be seen as an always contingent term for a 'mark of the absence of a presence, an always-already absent present', of the 'originary lack' that seems to be 'the condition of thought and experience'. Trace is a contingent unit of the critique of language always-already present: 'language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique'. This couples to Derrida’s idea of *deconstruction* which, unlike analysis or interpretation, tries to lay the inner contradictions of a text bare, and, in turn, build a different meaning from that: it is at once a process of destruction and construction. This is the source for his concept used by Danto 'always-already', hidden' contradiction is trace.

⁸ Danto, 2007: xi.