

## HUMAN AND AESTHETIC FINITUDE

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The etymology of the word 'aesthetics' lends a broadness to the term, originating as it does in reference to feeling or the senses, evolving through to considerations of beauty and its judgement and ultimately also to the philosophy of art. It's a contested term, and contemporary dictionary definitions tend to oscillate between aesthetics either as the study or judgement of beauty or taste, or a concern with the philosophy of art or artistic movements. Most definitions point to a *connection* between the notions of art and beauty, but typically hesitate to make the connection absolute.

The uncertainty of aesthetics as concerning either the realm of art or the realm of beauty or judgement is relevant to discussions of contemporary art, new materialism and object oriented ontology. It is through the lens of an art practice situated at the end of art – the end of the modern project that sought art's definition or essence – that I will focus on the theme of aesthetics beyond human finitude.

In speaking of aesthetics in relation to object oriented ontology, I refer here to Timothy Morton's ideas around the notion of causality as in itself aesthetic, from his book *Realist Magic, Objects, Ontology, Causality*:

The reason why art is important is that it's an exploration of causality, which as we know since post-Newtonian physics involves a lot more than just little metal balls clunking one another ... entities interact in a sensual ether that is (at least to some extent) nonlocal and nontemporal. That's how objects can influence one another despite the fact that they are enclosed from all forms of access... So when old fashioned art criticism speaks of timeless beauty, it is saying something quite profound about the nature of causation, not about spuriously universal human values.<sup>1</sup>

Morton's understanding of aesthetics strongly connects art with beauty and the senses; for him, aesthetics is vital to an object-oriented understanding of the world, because:

Causality floats in front of objects, figuratively speaking. It doesn't lie underneath them like some grey machinery. Another way of saying this is that causality must belong to the aesthetic dimension. To study the aesthetic dimension, then, is to study causality.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic, Objects, Ontology, Causality*, Open Humanities Press 2013, 20  
(<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/p/pod/dod-idx/realist-magic-objects-ontology-causality.pdf?c=ohp;idno=13106496.0001.001>)

<sup>2</sup> Morton, 30

With this sense of aesthetics, reality ceases to be a construct and becomes 'real', because it is, '...encrypted against access by any object, including a probing human mind'.<sup>3</sup>

It would seem here that an effort to view the world as operating aesthetically, where aesthetics is understood specifically in its connection with the senses, means we avoid the problem of reality existing merely as illusion due to the subjectivity of our individual views. The way things appear can act on and change the world, therefore great agency exists in relation to a sense of aesthetics as appearance. For Morton, art as aesthetics has a major role to play in an object-oriented view. He goes on:

The trouble is, when you only have the meshwork, the mask, without the possibility that there's something real underneath it, then you have no play, no pretense, no illusion, no display, no magic. You know it's an illusion—so it isn't an illusion. You know there is no essence—this becomes the essence, a shadowy, inverted form of the very essentialism you are trying to escape. This is the trouble with performance art, or at least the manifestoes of conceptual art. By undoing the difference between art and nonart, by self-consciously getting rid of self-consciousness and professional artists, conceptual art ignores the Rift between essence and appearance, reducing the ontological to the merely ontic. An overall atmosphere of jaded cynicism hangs over it.<sup>4</sup>

From this quote, it seems Morton views the movements of performance and conceptual art as somehow invalid art forms, at least in his view of aesthetics as appearance and causality. By introducing the idea of anti-art and questioning the nature or relevance of art as an object, these quite recent movements may be seen to cast doubt on or even remove art's aesthetic element: their very questioning of the essence of art 'becomes their essence', resulting – according to Morton – in the idea that nothing is real. Anti-art movements in this view are conceived as anti-reality, and perhaps anti- the object oriented ontology Morton is pursuing.

Elsewhere in Morton's book he refers in a more positive sense to the paintings of Turner and Bridget Riley:

The aesthetic experience that we humans now call 'beauty' is a naked experience of relations between entities: between the Turner painting and me; among the brushstrokes in the painting; between me and you, both having the experience; and so on.<sup>5</sup>

You are working directly with people's optic nerve and field of vision, as in a Bridget Riley painting. You cause the optical system to vibrate, creating

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<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> Morton, 75

<sup>5</sup> Morton, 90

interference patterns. Your painting is a device, a machine, an object that has causal effects.<sup>6</sup>

Morton's argument seems based here on a sense of art as something essential and unchanging, wherein a painting by Riley *or* Turner may hold equal power as objects. Their power lies in their objecthood – rather than in, say, their historically contingent significance – and so for Morton a study of the realm of art suggests the possibility of a broader study of aesthetics as causality within and between objects in reality.

Turner was a man, painting at a time when women were either not encouraged, or more frequently not permitted, to exhibit their work; a time when artists painted representationally and framed their works, complying with institutional demands in order that their objects were perceived as art. About a century later, Riley was practicing at a historical moment wherein women were at least beginning to be recognised by art institutions, and where non-representational, brush-stroke free, and unframed paintings *were* allowed to be art. This change in art's conditions was identified by Arthur Danto as the progressively modernist opening of art's canon, wherein the only acceptable or recognisable form for art of one period was surpassed and new forms developed that had not been previously allowed, let alone seen or recognised as belonging to 'art' as a concept. The radical changes evidence in the progression of art's form or its objects over this time reflects the changes in the thinking of the society *around* those objects, the society which permitted objects to be endowed with the sacred quality of 'art-ness'.

This is a linear, time-based, historical view of art, wherein the passage of progressive movements throughout modernism culminated, arguably, in the 1960s with movements such as conceptual and pop art. At the onset of these movements, the canon of art had become open enough to allow work that was not only non-representational, but also not painting, not a hand-made object, and ultimately not even an object. Low art forms such as advertising or celebrity images were allowed into the hallowed realms of high art; events and occurrences were art, art-business was art, relationships were art, and political acts were art. This view of modern art as historical and progressive revolves more around art as idea, philosophy and even anthropology, and less around the beauty, magic, causality, of the art object, or any essential approach to art as a concept.

In 1969, conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth expressly separated the concept 'art' from a sense of aesthetics:

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<sup>6</sup> Morton, 24

It is necessary to separate aesthetics from art because aesthetics deals with opinions on perception of the world in general. In the past one of the two prongs of art's function was its value as decoration. So any branch of philosophy that dealt with "beauty" and thus, taste, was inevitably duty bound to discuss art as well. Out of this 'habit' grew the notion that there was a conceptual connection between art and aesthetics, which is not true. This idea never drastically conflicted with artistic considerations before recent times, not only because the morphological characteristics of art perpetuated the continuity of this error, but as well, because the apparent other 'functions' of art (depiction of religious themes, portraiture of aristocrats, detailing of architecture, etc.) used art to cover up art.<sup>7</sup>

Here, Kosuth clearly states his belief concerning art as something independent of objects or aesthetics. He labels notions of beauty, taste and aesthetics historical 'habits', claims that a view of art as object-based allowed the continuity of 'this error' and believes that the art's more practical functions have obscured its true essence.

A view of art as a concept distinct from objects is also apparent in Lippard's 1973 anthology *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* which documents this movement. Lippard wrote a new introduction for the book's reprint in 1997 called *Escape Attempts*, wherein she reflected on the nature of the movement twenty five years prior. While not herself an artist, Lippard was closely associated with conceptual art and artists, participating within the scene as a curator, writer and art critic, often employing an experimental style of curating and writing.

*Escape Attempts'* picture of conceptual art is a detailed one, and while Lippard herself operated within New York's conceptual art scene, she emphasises the internationalism of the movement, occurring as it did seemingly spontaneously and concurrently over a broad sweep of cities globally. Her essay refers to the many and varied forms taken by conceptual art, such as mail art, earthworks, performance art, happenings, actions and even minimalism. Sol LeWitt spoke of conceptual art with a 'small c' and conceptual art with a 'capital C'; for Lippard, 'capital C' conceptual art is: '...work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or "dematerialized"'.<sup>8</sup>

In her essay, Lippard quotes Sol LeWitt from 1969:

Ideas alone can be works of art; they are a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical...the words

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy*, Studio International October 1969  
<http://tallervi.pbworks.com/f/Art%20After%20Philosophy.pdf> (accessed 18<sup>th</sup> Jan 15)

<sup>8</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Escape Attempts*, from *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, 1997, University of California Press pvii

of one artist to another may induce an idea chain, if they share the same concept.

John Baldessari:

I was beginning to suspect that information could be interesting in its own right and need not be visual...

And Joseph Beuys:

To be a teacher is my greatest work of art. The rest is the waste product, a demonstration...Objects aren't very important for me anymore.

Similar quotes from a variety of artists may be found from this time: artists whose work we may understand and experience today as visual and object-bound appeared to desire an escape from the object.

Lippard describes the dematerialised nature of conceptual art as an attempt to escape the 'frame-and-pedestal' syndrome, as being anti- art-as-commodity, and as evolving from art as idea and art as action. Conceptual art's dematerialized form made it an inexpensive and unintimidating medium, which Lippard notes made art more accessible to women than previous movements had. She writes that while conceptual art itself may appear timid and disconnected when compared to the political activism of the time, conceptual artists themselves looked and sounded like radicals. Even if the art was apolitical, its presentation, its form, or lack thereof, was radical. Often, it was the *form* of conceptual art that was political over its content. The desire existed to attack notions of originality, individual style and genius, which Lippard describes as 'the most cherished aspects of patriarchal, ruling-class art'.

Nonetheless, Lippard is realistic about the actual outcomes of this period:

However rebellious the escape attempts, most of the work remained art-referential, and neither economic nor esthetic ties to the art world were fully severed (though at times we liked to think they were hanging by a thread).<sup>9</sup>

Even as early as 1973, Lippard wrote in the 'Postface' of the original publication of *Six Years*:

Hopes that 'conceptual art' would be able to avoid the general commercialization, the destructively 'progressive' approach of modernism were for the most part unfounded.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Lippard, pxvii

<sup>10</sup> Lippard, xxi

While the artists of 1969 believed nobody would want to pay money for the ephemeral objects they were producing, in reality only three years later some conceptual artists were selling these objects overseas, and were represented by prestigious galleries. Nonetheless, in 1997 Lippard and other conceptual artists retained the hope that, 'the most exciting "art" might still be buried in social energies not yet recognized as art'; Lippard hopes that while art's escape from the object was temporary, that the spirit of the art remains. She ends her essay: 'Art was recaptured and sent back to its white cell, but parole is always a possibility'.<sup>11</sup>

The sentiments expressed by Lippard, and her memories and accounts of conceptual art as a movement, seem far removed from the 'atmosphere of jaded cynicism' Morton claims hangs over the concerns of this period. Where Morton sees art in its object-ness as intrinsic to a more radical view of the world, Lippard and other conceptualists viewed it as a kind of cell. So which one is it? Where does the art belong? Is the object a cell which holds the transformative power of art prisoner, or is the materiality of art a force with which we may apprehend objects' impact in the world, in their becoming: a way of apprehending reality itself?

Peter Osborne, in defining contemporary art as 'post-conceptual', believes art's ultimate inability to escape the object through conceptual art is proof that contemporary art should retain a sense of the aesthetic in relation to its definition or philosophy. In reality however, contemporary art can take any form, and frequently lacks physical form entirely. Artists today are free to make painting, sculpture or installation, abstract, representational or both, in any medium: we can perform, throw a party, cook a meal or write and deliver a paper. Contemporary art objects may be classically beautiful or totally repulsive, and adopt anything from a conceptual to a kitsch aesthetic. A more simplistic but perhaps convincing view of contemporary art as a post-conceptual art is that contemporary art occurs after, and is therefore necessarily informed by, the aims and outcomes of the conceptual period. Rather than accept Osborne's sense of the necessity of aesthetics – Lippard's prison of the object – in an attempt to define contemporary art, the field may instead be more realistically characterised as a radically open one, accommodating the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic, the material and the non-material.

Arthur Danto identifies the arising of this radically open field historically as a characteristic of the 'end of art' – a period wherein art activity and production do not literally end but expand exponentially. Danto defines the opening of the canon of art through modernism as a search art's *essence*: this agrees with Morton's characterisation of conceptual or performance art's de-materialisation as a similar search – however the search for art's essence is not limited to these more recent movements.

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<sup>11</sup> Lippard, xxii

While Turner's paintings certainly possess a certain materiality, to view them exclusively *as* material is to overlook the radicality of his style and undervalue the contribution he made to overturning the way a painting should look or what it should do. It is due to the challenge Turner's work posed to a sense of art as representation, due to his very *modernity*, that we value Turner today. The radicality of a painting by Turner is identical to the radicality of performance or conceptual art: it would be equally impossible to remove either of these movements from art's history, and art would not be what it is today without them.

Danto characterises the openness to forms in the contemporary moment as a great freedom for artists, however the reality is that it is also a great burden. The freedom can be stultifying - as a practicing artist, I feel the weight of Warhol's frequent question, 'what can we do for Art?' Current despair over art object's escalating commodity status and debates concerning its political efficacy or radical potential reflect the problematics of this situation. Conceptual art leaves a difficult heritage and a perplexing puzzle with which contemporary artists may engage. How do you make art at the end of art?

Paradoxically, Morton's view of art and aesthetics has more in common with the pure manifestos of conceptual art than he may wish to be the case. In a further statement regarding Turner's work, Morton states that, 'all relations are aesthetic, not just ones between humans and objects such as Turner paintings'<sup>12</sup> - a sentiment that mirrors conceptual art's utopic vision for an art grounded in the everyday, located within relations and actions rather than the hallowed realm of art and its canonised forms.

The dematerialisation of the art object throughout modernism is underscored by a sense of art's ending: a seemingly negative, nihilistic, and undesirable state of affairs. However rather than attempt to turn back from or deny this notion, there may be potential for a view of contemporary art to incorporate rather than deny the most recent movements of its modernist heritage. The gradual disappearance of the art object mirrors the gradual refutation of the primacy of the thinking subject within Western philosophy, since modern art's constant search for what is 'real' about art may be seen to reflect the current sense that something real exists outside of our ability to think it. A speculative view of art then should include a statement that art has ended: this category to which we have clung for so long may be the very thing holding us back from the freedom and reality we desire.

So long as the ability exists to point to that which is art and that which is not art, we will retain the dualistic nature of art as a category; however if everything is art, if its nature is absolute and not

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<sup>12</sup> Morton, 90

contested, the potential may exist to realise conceptual (and modern) art's utopic vision of art as radical thought existing within everything and the everyday, rather than a rarefied category or activity for particular spaces or audiences. The end of art as a category reveals art's existence everywhere, from game design to landscape gardening, programming, vlogs, fashion, science, or urban planning. In such a world, notions of creativity and self-expression belong to all, unconfined by the realm of artistic genius. Whether such a utopic vision is possible or desirable is unknown, but it may *only* be possible with the destruction of the category 'art'. In this utopic vision, art is an absolute, an accepted part of life which could inform our lives and augment sectors of life and activity otherwise deemed 'non-art'.

At the end of art, aesthetics assumes its definition in relation to philosophy over the judgement of beauty or taste. Whether art as a category is destructible remains to be seen, but if, as Hans Belting claims, a time existed before 'art', it may also be possible there *is* a time after art. Contemporary art, as a post-conceptual art grappling with that movement's heritage, seems to require a philosophy of art – or aesthetics – that accommodates this end.