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Duchamp and the Science of Art

Miklos Legrady

Postmodern art claims an intellectual foundation based on ideas proposed at the start of the 20th century, including a rejection of aesthetics by artist Marcel Duchamp and author Walter Benjamin. Today we can draw on readily available studies in the sciences of anthropology, sociology, and psychology to correct these mistakes. A review of language as the formative structure of thinking suggests it is likely the intellect is but one of many linguistic functions in the brain; feelings, for example, are obviously part of the equation. Duchamp's process of discarding aesthetics and making art intellectual does not enhance but reduces the work's complexity. This calls for a reassessment of the postmodern paradigm. An intellectual art is dysfunctional without aesthetics, according to the science now available.

The ideas presented in this essay draw on studies of non-verbal languages to suggest that such languages operate continually alongside the intellect. Among non-verbal languages we discern body language, both unconscious and in ritualized forms such as dance; acoustic language in the complexity of sounds, including music; and visual language, where a picture is worth a thousand words.

Linguistic theory finds that language has its origins in biology, in bodily functions, since there has to be a language for the brain to think with. This proto-language and similar codifications of momentary experience are an evolutionary inheritance, a complex abstraction built on an almost infinite range of sensations and reactions since the dawn of time.

In the arts, aesthetics is a system of value judgments, of comparisons and evaluations that provide statistical data by which we organize sensations pouring in from without, and reactions emerging from within. Aesthetics plays a meaningful

role in this linguistic theory of intelligence, because as a set of judgments it covers the entire spectrum from attraction to repulsion, from dark to light, and similar sensory dualities. Art and aesthetics are not simply cheesecake for the mind nor are they simply decorative. They are an evolutionary adaptation of the highest order in creating and processing subtleties of knowledge and complexities of thought.

We know that those who learn music as children acquire an omega-shaped fold in the lower right at the back of the brain. Neuroscientist Karl Friston developed an imaging technique that was used in a famous study to show that the rear side of the hippocampus of London taxi drivers grew in volume as they memorized maps when applying for a taxi license. It would be fascinating to compare the visual cortex of an experienced artist with the population at large. It is not that phrenology is making a comeback, but rather that data confirms knowledge resides in neural networks. The brain, much like the rest of the body, is therefore improved by practice, by repetition, by acquiring experience that turns into skill.

This process of learning and the skills acquired contradict any suggestion that art is about ideas and not about the making. In this regard, Marcel Duchamp's work serves as a cautionary tale. From his experiments we learn that an intellectual art was, and still is, reductive and harmful. In a 1968 BBC interview with Joan Bakewell, Duchamp claimed the conceptual mantle when he said that until his time painting was retinal, what you could see, and that he made it intellectual. Today we know that Duchamp stopped painting once he made painting intellectual. "It was like a broken leg" he said, "you didn't mean to do it." Soon after, Duchamp stopped making art altogether. Discarding the sensory base of aesthetics, he'd lost the desire and ability to make art. Yet all was not forgotten. For twenty years he poked and prodded at *Étant donnés* as if trying to revive a lost relationship. But the Muse was gone and like any spurned lover she was not coming back.

Archeologists tell us humans are hard-wired to seek beauty. Dennis Dutton wrote that aesthetic perceptions are evolutionary and likely to enhance survival of the perceiving human's genes. If art is based in biology then it is specific and not socially conditioned, nor is it "anything you can get away with," as Marshall McLuhan declared. Art plays a fundamental cultural role as essential today as it ever was in the past, so we might infer that a counter-aesthetic postmodernity nurtured and contributed to the social disorder and political trauma of our time.

Conceptual art now risks a critique and requires analytic consideration. Ideas cannot overleap entropy. They cannot

replace a work of art, whose validity is found in creative work, in entanglement with material. Ideas cannot substitute for an engagement with life, for the effort and skill that is the *sine qua non* of fine art. "Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do." Goethe

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