EMPATHY AND ABSTRACTION, (EXCERPTS)

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What I have been trying to think about this year is something quite simple – how the relationship we have with art can make us more human when it shows things beyond what society allows us to experience. How through art we can see beyond the horizon of learned expectations. For me this thinking is a bit of an evolution. Most of the work I have done until this point in my life has been based on existing art objects and artifacts collected and then re-organized to suggest the possibility of emancipation. These days I'm trying to make things a little differently, as discrete objects that approach my previous concerns somewhat tangentially.

This production is awakening questions that I have long held on the relationship between abstract art and the feeling we call sympathy or empathy. I'm starting with a great student of emotions, the philosopher David Hume. He thought a lot about the way that perceptions of the world could diagram the close yet failing connection between morality and emotion, when described in our senses and embodied in our poetics. He said, and I am paraphrasing, that the correspondence of human souls, that no sooner than any person approaches me, he diffuses onto me all his opinions, and draws along my judgment in a greater or lesser degree. And though, on many occasions, my sympathy with him goes not so far as to entirely change my sentiments, and way of thinking; it seldom is so weak as not to disturb the easy course of my thought. The principle of sympathy is so powerful and insinuating a nature that it enters into most of our sentiments and passions, and often takes place under the appearance of its contrary. For it is remarkable that when a person opposes me in any thing and rouses up my passion by contradiction, I always have a degree of sympathy with him, and my commotion cannot proceed from any other origin. Hume is saying, I think, that the differences we have with each other are always in a state of being overcome, interrupted by what we have in common, and this commonness is discoverable in the mere fact that we confront alienation in every meeting.

Nonspecific and removed, abstraction is often understood as a purposefully limited relation between humans and their ideas – cutting our sense of things in order to approach their complexity without a full description; disdaining legibility to open richer, multiple readings. It is as if abstract imagination seeks to allow something lost, or something too big to see at once, to creep into our daily vision. The strange thing is that when this happens successfully – we do more than see differently – we feel differently. We can understand more when looking through the loss that abstraction removes. This survival is made understandable in mediation with objects, and in particular with objects we call artworks – things that present a world that before they arrived, was indifferent to our feelings.

When I think about how art shows human survival, I am reminded of times I have spent sharing the desperation of political urgency in collective dislocation. The sharing of dislocation, of looking for a new place in which to look at our lives, can produce aesthetic epiphany. But how does this work? I'm wondering what it means these days to employ abstract images as a participant in social organizing efforts. For many years I was a collaborator in Group Material, an artistic process determined by the idea that social liberation could be created through the displacement of art into the world, and the world into the spaces of art. We saw our designed exhibitions as a way to picture democracy – and although anchored in activism, we wanted our projects to live in the worlds both within and without the field of art.

Today I'm interested in how Group Material's exhibition designs assigned democracy's unpredictability and inclusivity to an imaginable shape, a shape you could feel, a shape that is always irregular and fluctuating: an abstraction. This was and still is an affecting proposal for the politics of real life: an aesthetic invention that evinces life's practical dilemmas as a dream we are working through. But what is the nature of this irregular shape? And if it is abstract, a term suggesting withdrawal – from what does it remove itself? What is it showing outside of depiction? In examining the social practice of my past, one thing that

becomes clear is that abstract imaginings of social experience enable the consequences and contingencies of our political imagination to open up to fantasy. This shift allows the refiguring of both artistic and social re-invention.

I'm wondering that if an abstract fantasy can partially deny reference to actual life, then maybe it can then go on to offer another kind of solace, another chance for action. As the forms of actual life are forced to filter through the ideal projections of abstraction, life can be repositioned – moving our concepts and our bodies into contexts of self-design. This suggests a possibility of creating a distinction between the emotions that are designed for us by the world of power and domination, and new feelings that can be built independently. After all, we are overflowing with the obscurities of memory, the stunning misrecognitions they produce, our exchanges with one another, the use of ourselves by others, the use of ourselves by our selves, our dreams of our helplessness newly recognized together. Art repeatedly demonstrates that we can put these autonomous senses together into new things, things we can look at and talk about.

I might be confused here between an art that is abstract in its excessive inclusion, movement overflowing with agency, and an art that reveals something previously unknown by excluding references to the real. But maybe there is a way to get from one to the other. My experiences with exhibition design presented collections of art as places where social mutuality and personal antagonism both could be embodied. And that embodiment signals the possibility of turning away – or toward other things, other people.

This was equivalent to viewing oneself through a variety of bodies and positions, looking through another's eyes across vistas, toward this or that event, or even inwards. The Renaissance notion that one can occupy the eyeballs of another through a perspective delineated in an artwork assumes that through transubstantiation, we could encounter something beyond the possible. Its shock is related to the formal and physical presence of a stranger, and it is difficult to discuss rationally, since immersion into another person is so much more than the strict diagramming of corporeal perspective, the agreement or disagreement with a position. Instead, we are faced with the re-arrangement of all our sensibilities into something outside of us, finding the self in another. Once achieved, such identification can be invested in finding even farther things, feeling difference across even larger boundaries.

This is certainly an old idea, one alluded to in the David Hume quote I read earlier, and beautifully re-diagrammed by the art historian Wilhelm Worringer who wrote at the very beginning of the 20th century. He insisted that identification outside of the self and with another is pivotal to all aesthetic experience. In fact such power exists only *because of* its representation in art. Without art, we flounder in oceanic solitude, unable to look away from ourselves.

He said, quoting Goethe,

> "The Classical feeling for art has its basis in the same fusion of man and world, the same consciousness of unity, which is expressed in humanity's attribution of a soul to all created things. Here too the presupposition is that human nature 'knows itself one with the world and therefore does not experience the objective external world as something alien, that comes toward the inner world of man from without, but recognizes in it the answering counterpart to its own sensations.'" [1]

Worringer went on to insist that we must see the world as a "counterpart to our own sensations." Departing from philosophy, he arrived in a world of psychological mysticism, trying to figure out what it means to lose and re-find the self in sensual experiences. One important document of this journey is the essay *Abstraction and Empathy*, from which I have just quoted. He goes on to state:

> "The need for empathy can be looked upon as a presupposition of artistic

> volition only where this artistic volition inclines toward the truths of organic life, that is toward naturalism in the higher sense. The sensation of happiness that is released in us by the reproduction of organically beautiful vitality, what modern man designates beauty, is a gratification of that inner need for self-activation… aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment. The value of a line, of a form consists for us in the value of the life that it holds for us. It holds its beauty only through our own vital feeling, which in some mysterious manner, we project into it." [2]

This sensibility that Worringer is naming is a reassessment of experiences that his predecessors called the beautiful – experiences of the world that could overwhelm. And he compared this to the feelings of identification with other people that Hume outlined for us earlier, to sympathy. Why do we gain sympathy in the presence of complex objects? How do they move us? Worringer believed we change ourselves in two ways when faced with the world: in alienation from it, but also in identification with it. He believed the success of art, its complexity, derives from the negotiation of these two points.

Part of Worringer's project was to set out to distinguish the sense we have of empathy in art by separating it, opposing it to another sense of visual organization: abstraction. Where empathic experiences of beauty are volumetric and accepting, abstractive are flat and insist we project into other models. Where empathy is a solitary position, abstraction is collective. Empathy is naturalism; abstraction shows the possibility of style. It is important to say here that the English term 'empathy' as I say it now, is an inadequate translation of his German word, 'Einfühlung': 'feeling-into'. Worringer attached this sense specifically to the imagery associated with classicism and naturalism, forms of art we can *feel into*. By recognizing ourselves in images of each other, we are changed in some fundamental way – allowed to feel the structure of humanness.

It is important to see in this instance that abstraction could be understood as a sense that is in opposition to 'feeling into' - abstract as anti-naturalistic and based in thoughts could make experiences where empathy would fall short. Abstraction, not against representation per se, was a form of art Worringer considered newly generous, capable of presenting humanity outside identification, beyond the other we predict in ourselves. This is a place he thinks we need to go at times in order to see the external world as changeable. He says:

> "While the tendency of empathy has as its condition a happy pantheistic relation of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world, the tendency to abstraction is the result of a great inner conflict between man and his surroundings, and corresponds in religion to a strongly transcendental coloring of all ideas. This state we might call a prodigious mental fear of space." [3]

Such an abstraction is still emotive then – but a production of feelings that can reconcile our apprehension with the outside world. Things outside us, Worringer implied, need to be redrawn to our overcome anxiety in their presence – rediscovered in collective experience and individual perception. To make an abstract image of the world, he said, is not to admit incompetence at depiction or mimesis but rather to embrace a psychological need to show the world as seen through the imperfect distortions of humanity. Perhaps this means that Abstraction and Empathy are opposite positions that absolutely must be held onto simultaneously. Maybe we can see them as two ends of the same magic wand. Abstraction known in addition to Empathy could deliver the outside world to us, as both fluctuating other and absolute difference.

How can I suggest then that abstraction is a rearrangement of each of us happening in another person? How can we have both the love that accompanies empathy, and the distance and comfort that abstraction delimits? How about a rupture with things that stabilize me? Breaking me as a

rational participant of the world as it is already organized – and pushing me towards a world that has not yet existed? Without experiencing this rupture perhaps we would never see anything at all. But even more wildly, maybe things would not see us. Worringer suggests that the world itself is adjusted or modified through our understandings and expressions of it. If empathy is the stabilizing embrace of oneself in another, abstraction is a resolution to experience ourselves in concert with the instability of the world, unstable, experimental, and provisional.

And this is obvious perhaps: that an unstable identification outside of the accepted norms of human experience could be inclusive and enfolding. What else can we do when we don't really know how things really are? Or whether there are 'things' at all? In many abstract presentations there is potential for a wide breadth of meanings in multiplicity or relatedness. This is an implication that is very important today – meaning that is off-center, that can't easily contain a declared position or that can be delivered from a distance; gaining the possibility of more space for the maneuvering or the naming of our selves, our collective work.

I want to understand an art that demands the disordering of the world's restrictions; demands a position of reversal or of turning around: away from the rationalization of every day life; away from desire's contemporary expression in commodity and violence. This may seem like a turning away from the future. But it is not in order to ignore a future or any hope for future – only a turning away from the false certainty of progress – a turning back to the present. Orpheus turned back; Walter Benjamin's angel of history turned back. This turning proposes that our conditions of subjection can be extended into things we love instead of the things we obey; and the responses of loved things can become an opportunity for changes in ourselves: stylizations, perversions.

This may be why love is seen as so in need of reclaiming and revitalization today – love as a way of seeing beyond the wreckage upon wreckage that makes the present. An abstract love would be something that could map the settings we are secretly familiar with in facing the world alone. Like empathy made absolute, or nature made complete in abstraction, love is a condition from which we can always be forgiven and at the same time forgive ourselves – no matter how profane.

Art becomes a portal into our helplessness by allowing us the space to admit we are helpless together – proving that love can sometimes become a political concept. Abstraction more specifically gives us a sense that we can position this love inside visual forms that exist beyond reference, forms we invent outside of the existing spaces of power, outside laws and languages already built. What can we ever command when we remain statically centered in a rational acceptance of the 'terms of the debate'? Our compromises with the promise of laws, and their supposed progress, lead us away from seeing each other.

By linking the feelings of love embedded in artistic experience to larger forms of acquiring knowledge we touch the archives of social ideas; their homes – by asking audiences to re-make themselves without reality in their affection to others living and dead, we can show that art overcomes the humiliation of life's present organization. The magic wand of abstraction joined to empathy provide both a release and an opportunity – a moment for the production of new frames for love. Together they make a frame for a third position, structured I would like to think, by the abstract images we can make from each other, with each other. After all the thinking and writing I have realized that in truth I began to make abstract paintings simply because I liked how they looked. They looked like the failures of my life lit up by possibility.

* This essay was excerpted from the discursive lecture *We Sometimes Say Dreams When We Want to Say Hopes, or Wishes, or Aspiration*, written with Angelo Bellfatto and collaboratively delivered at The New Museum, NYC on April 29, 2011.

1. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, Michael Bullock (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 128
2. Ibid., TK
3. Ibid., TK

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