

PAINTING SPACE: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN DISCIPLINES

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ABSTRACT

My paper concerns the ongoing negotiation that artists have with space. Debates that exist within architectural design, cognitive psychology, choreography and fine art painting reveal ideas about human perception and experiential qualities of space. My paper explores some of these ideas as they interface with art practices. My purpose is to demonstrate the importance that space has for human creativity and for painting in particular. I take as my starting point the view that human perception of space is experienced in a relative form. In philosophical terms our perception of space can be thought of as a 'primeordial expression of our being-in-the-world'. (Liu, S., Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Space, The 3rd BESETO Conference of Philosophy, <http://utcpc> 2012)

I wish to include ideas about space from a number of disciplines; the choreographer William Forysthe, the architect Daniel Libeskind and recent philosophical theories about human perception developed by the cognitive psychologist Alva Noe. My research has a practical purpose which is to examine the spatial properties of colour and to use these to help inform my current arts practice. My paper is linked directly to my practice as a fine artist in constructing a dialogue with paint as a synthesis of an earlier era of painting; that of the 1950's in the U.S.A. and Europe. This venture is entitled: 'Large Paintings for Small Spaces'. Its premise is that applied by the Russian artist Serge Poliakoff:

"Search for an idea, opposite to another idea, then create a third that will germinate from the two." (D. Vallier, *Poliakoff*, Paris 1975, p 7)

INTRODUCTION

This paper offers a series of suggestions in the form of a conversation between disciplines and is of necessity an exploration of notions of space as encountered in painting. The conversation centres around a conglomeration of ideas about space within both philosophical and non-philosophical thought in Western Europe toward the end of the 20th century. My purpose is to render some of the discoveries made concerning colour during the last century and to resurrect some of these discoveries, in particular those associated with post-second world war painting, in light of these cross-disciplinary ideas about space.

The philosopher Henri Lefebvre writing about space states that it 'does not consist of the projection of an intellectual representation,' nor does it 'arise from the visible-readable realm, but it is first of all *heard* (listened to) and *enacted* (through physical gestures and movements).' [1] Whilst the act of painting is generally regarded as a purely visual process involving mood and emotions I wish to explore the physicality of this process as one that is informed by a much broader perceptual range of thought and action involving the artist's direct experience of space.

Painting Space

The colour field painter Mark Rothko observed the highly innovative changes that artists during the modernist period had brought to our understanding of space through their

experimentation in properties of colour and composition. During the 1940's he recorded his thoughts on colour and space in an unpublished manuscript, 'The Artist's Reality' (this text was published posthumously in 2004):

“If one understands, or if one has the sensibility to live in, the particular kind of space to which a painting is committed, then he has obtained the most comprehensive statement of the artist's attitude toward reality. Space, therefore, is the chief plastic manifestation of the artist's conception of reality. It is the most inconclusive category of the artist's statement and can very well be called the key to the meaning of the picture. It constitutes a statement of faith, an a priori utility, to which all of the plastic elements are in a state of subservience.”

The artist Larry Poons, a painter heavily influenced by the de Stijl group that existed in Europe during the 1920's, Piet Mondrian being the most well known member, presented abstract images in the 1960's which gave the viewer a visual sensation of colour by painting elliptical shapes against a contrasting background. The effects of this kind of sensory perception of colour became the trade-mark of the Op Art movement during the sixties. The sensory qualities that viewers experience from looking at these and similar works are related to visual illusions used by cognitive psychologists to study human perception. For the viewer colours appear to move above the surface of the painting and the brain maintains an after-image which creates further sensations of movement within a space.

However, once the same images are reproduced in black and white this sense of movement minimized. Contrasting tonal values alone do not provide the same degree of stimulation to the visual system that offers this more textured understanding or perception of space. The 19th century artist, Paul Cezanne's efforts to resonate human visual experience of space in his repeated paintings of Mont St. Victoire is also noted in the observations made by J. Brodsky in "A Paradigm Case for Merleau-Ponty: The Ambiguity of Perception and the Paintings of Paul Cezanne," *Artibus et Histoire* 2, no. 4 (1981) and referred to in a recent unpublished doctoral thesis by Bren Carolyn Unwin entitled *Phenomenology and Landscape Experience: A Critical Appraisal for Contemporary Art Practice* (University of Hertfordshire, 2008). This heightened visual sensation that is thought to be an effect of a multi-sensory experience or 'embodied experience', as derived from Merleau-Ponty's exposition of the lived-experience of space. Unwin describes the interpretation of human experience from a phenomenological viewpoint to be a form of synaesthesia in which all five senses overlap.

A more contemporary artist, Julie Mehretu who like Poons, is based in New York, has developed her approach to drawing that could be defined as one that employs both painting and mark but which references architectural space, city plans and sky views. Her works vary greatly in terms of scale from a modest size A3 format to 140 x 187" and in her use of line, colour and diagrammatic content. Her subjects are geographical spaces and the human activity that inhabits them. These are not static two-dimensional images, but dynamic surfaces showing spatial relationships denoted by gestural marks on the one hand and highly precise measured linear structures on the other. In the case of Mehretu's images a sensation of movement is achieved by a combination of linear matrices rather than with colour combinations.

Visual Theory And Space

Cognitive theories of human visual perception have explained human understanding of space as a reading of depth, movement and size constancy. Texture and proximity add further detail. The additional properties of the visual world that incorporate light, hue and colour saturation, which painting employs as prerequisite to any composition have received far less attention in studies of human perception of space.

Our perception is based upon a limited visual process which according to orthodox visual theory is supported by ‘detailed representations underlying actual perceptual experience’ (Alva Noë, 2002). Noë is skeptical about the efficiency of vision as presented by standard visual theory. Recent cognitive neural science according to Noë places the world outside of our brains. His recent research begins with the premise that human experience is directly linked to our need to act on the world whether we are stationary or not. Thus our sense of what we perceive is not dependent upon our conscious representation of that world but of our knowledge of our access to it:

“This knowledge takes the form of our comfortable mastery of the rules of sensorimotor dependence that mediate our relation to our immediate environment.” (Noë, 2002, p 10)

Noë’s view is endorsed by findings on early human development that show our perceptual understanding of our environment is acquired simultaneously with motor skills and the physical facility to apply both within space. The child psychologists Alan Slater and Gavin Bremner refer to observational studies of young children:

“However, the claim is that they do have to construct relationships between perception and the new activities that they acquire during development. This needs to be done at the direct level of constructing spatial reference systems which allow them to adapt their activities to the perceptual world. And it also needs to be done at a level once removed, in which infants come to realize what certain types of perceptual information mean in relation to newly developed motor abilities.” (Slater, A. & Bremner, G., 1989, p 139)

Choreographic Ideas Of William Forsythe

In 2009 William Forsythe published an online interdisciplinary research tool, named Synchronous Objects. It has been produced by the Forsythe Company, in partnership with the Advanced Computing Center for the Arts and Design and Department of Dance at The Ohio State University. This digital software has been designed as an interdisciplinary analytical research tool. Its interactive properties operate within the structure of the choreographic work, ‘One Flat Thing, reproduced’. My interest in space and colour has been influenced by Forsythe’s purpose in devising Synchronous Objects which is to test, beyond the parameters of dance, how choreography may ‘generate autonomous expressions of its principals, a choreographic object, without the body?’ His interest in the interdisciplinary dimensions of this subject does not form any specific contingencies but invites practitioners to explore possible outcomes involving space as its central organizing principle in the construction of work. Forsythe explains that his main purpose in devising Synchronous Objects, an interactive website based upon his work ‘*One Flat Thing, reproduced*’ (premiered in 2000), is to reproduce the choreographic structures of this work to make the organizing principles visible after the performance is completed:

“Could it be conceivable that the ideas now seen as bound to a sentient expression are indeed able to exist in another durable, intelligible state?” (Forsythe, 2009)

Forsythe’s proposes that choreographic ideas that display structures based upon counterpoint and trajectories may be universally understood as representations of those ideas (or reproductions); but the purpose of Synchronous Objects is not simply to record a piece of choreography for archival purposes but to create a research tool which will invite interdisciplinary dialogue based upon creative pursuits rather than one that sets out a

prescribed methodology about 'physical thinking'. Zuniga Shaw, a co-director of Synchronous Objects is quoted as stating:

“When Bill explained his methodology for designing the choreography in *One Flat Thing, reproduced*. I felt an instant connection to his organizational principles, his use of spatial geometry, his creation of visual complexity, because they were deeply related to ideas from the visual arts and animation.”
(Synchronous Objects Media Site, 25/02/11, Zuniga Shaw)

The dance journalist and writer Roslyn Sulcas described this website as a research tool:

“for exploring the structures of a dance and a wildly creative extrapolation of the way that those structures can be pictorially expressed.” (Roslyn Sulcas writing for the New York Times, 24/03/09, ‘*Drawing Movements’ Connections*’, www.nytimes.com/2009/03/29/arts/dance/29sulc.html)

In architecture, Daniel Libeskind incorporates the idea of absence into spaces which then become defined by a sense of displacement within time. During a visit to the Jewish Museum in Berlin I was struck by the significance that space had in defining my own sense of spatial proximity.

“Both Libeskind and Forsythe are (perhaps surprisingly to some) more concerned with exposing the intricacies of process, rather than offering the public a fetishizable and final product. For Libeskind, products are uninteresting residues of the ‘participatory experience’, which he defines as the ‘emblem of reality which goes into their making’. For Forsythe, the participatory experience involves uncovering forms by working through the complex operational systems with the dancers...” (Baudoin, P. & Gilpin, H., 2006)

CONCLUSION

How a dancer, painter, drawer, architect or infant experiences space appears to require a form of organization that is multi-sensory and requires some knowledge of the world. I am interested in the possibilities that this knowledge has for making paintings that might incorporate a visual rendering of that human experience.

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