

the painter Ben Nicholson visiting the Rue du Départ studio in 1934 and 1935. As for theory, Nicholson said, “I could not be bothered to read Mondrian’s theories...What I got from him – and it was a great deal – I got *direct from the experience of his painting*” (Green 2012, p. 26; my emphasis).

Sophistication and background knowledge are not prerequisites for viewing artworks, not least as even sophisticated viewers are unsophisticated when first viewing an artwork. Art history should of course inform scientific research (and maybe even vice versa), but B&R’s blanket criticisms of these “representative studies” are surely unjustified.

The duality of art: Body and soul

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Abstract: Bullot & Reber (B&R) make a strong case for the role of causal reasoning in the appreciation of artwork. Although I agree that an artistic design stance is important for art appreciation, I suggest that it is a subset of a more general framework for evaluating artworks as the causal extensions of individuals, which includes inferences about the creator’s mind, as well as more physical notions of essence.

To date, the psychological study of art appreciation has primarily focused on the perceptual or aesthetic aspects of viewing and creating artwork. The target article by Bullot & Reber (B&R) seeks to expand the nature of this inquiry by highlighting the various ways in which art appreciation may readily incorporate aspects of causal reasoning (i.e., information about how an artwork came into being), as well as relevant historical information that situates the artwork within a broader context. Their theoretical framework helps to build important and potentially fruitful links to other areas of psychology and beyond. Here, I focus on one particular aspect of their theory in an effort to broaden the discussion surrounding the role of causal reasoning in the evaluation of artwork.

B&R suggest that one of the primary ways in which causal attributions impact our appreciation of artwork is through assessments of intentionality. In short, this “artistic design stance” views artwork as the unique product of intentional action and therefore takes into account inferences about the intentions and mental state of the creator. Indeed, there is empirical support for the notion that evaluations of mental states play a key role in people’s naïve theories about artwork (Bloom & Markson 1998; Newman & Bloom 2012; Olson & Shaw 2011). For example, when labeling drawings, children as young as 3 to 4 years old will prioritize the artist’s intentions over the drawing’s appearance (Bloom & Markson 1998). Similarly, inferences about mental states are central to how people distinguish between original artworks and perfect duplicates (Newman & Bloom 2012). For example, in one experiment we presented participants with two very similar landscape paintings. In one condition, participants were told that one artist painted the landscape first, whereas another artist decided to make a very similar painting after seeing the original. In another condition, participants read that the two artists each painted the same scene without knowledge of the other – the similar paintings happened merely as a coincidence. Participants were quite sensitive to the mental states of the artists, reporting that an intentional copy should be worth substantially less than the original, whereas the two coincidental duplicates should be equivalent in value.

This result is consistent with B&R’s theorizing, as well as others’ (Dutton 2003; 2009), who have suggested that static artwork is

evaluated as the end point of an artistic performance, and thus, our appreciation of an artwork is related to our intuitions about the processes that gave rise to its existence. However, one can ask about the precise form that such an appreciation might take. For example, one view might be that, “Artworks are the causal extensions of intentional actions.” In contrast, a slightly different view might be that, “Artworks are the causal extensions of human agents.” The key difference is the extent to which these accounts emphasize intentionality per se or, instead, a connection to agents more generally.

Consistent with this latter view, in other studies we find that, in addition to the role of intentions, people tend to place a special value on the degree of physical contact that an artist had with an artwork (Newman & Bloom 2012). For example, lay participants judged an authorized reproduction made by the artist’s assistant to be substantially less valuable than a reproduction made by the artist himself, a pattern that does not extend to comparable nonartistic artifacts. Similarly, holding constant the total amount of effort required to make an artwork, participants judged an artwork that had a great deal of physical contact with the artist to be more valuable than an identical artwork that had less physical contact, a pattern that also does not extend to nonartistic artifacts of comparable value.

Such patterns are consistent with a belief in contagion, which is the notion that through physical contact, objects can acquire a special quality or essence (e.g., Frazer 1890; Mauss 1902, Rozin & Nemeroff 2002). Belief in contagion and the transfer of essence has been supported by a wide variety of studies. For example, in the negative domain, people report that they would be unwilling to wear a sweater that was touched by Adolph Hitler (Nemeroff & Rozin 1994). Conversely, contact with positive individuals appears to increase an item’s appeal. Ordinary objects increase in value if they had physical contact with well-liked celebrities (Newman et al. 2011), and people are more likely to purchase a product if it was touched by an attractive person of the opposite sex (Argo et al. 2008). This contagion account extends naturally to art. For example, an original Picasso may be valuable because Picasso actually touched it, whereas the forgery has not been touched by Picasso and therefore would not contain any of his special essence.

One way to integrate both the importance of intentionality (or, design stance) and the importance of physical contact (i.e., contagion) is to suggest that when people evaluate artworks as the causal extensions of agents, they do so in terms of essentialism. Given a large body of work on intuitive notions of mind-body dualism (see Bloom 2004), evaluations of essence may therefore include evaluating artwork both as an extension of the artist’s *mind* (evaluations of the creator’s intentions and mental states), as well as an extension of the artist’s *body* (which includes evaluations of the degree of physical connection between the artist and the artwork).

Hence, although factors such as the artist’s intentions, mental states, and so forth, are important to art appreciation, it may be that an artistic design stance is a subset of a more general framework whereby artworks are evaluated as the causal extensions of human agents, including both mental and physical notions of essence. Such a conceptualization may serve to broaden the definition of essence in the context of art appreciation and may provide a useful framework for future research examining the role of causal reasoning in the evaluation of artwork.

Distinguishing intention and function in art appreciation

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