

The way things are not

Alfredo Cramerotti

As a field of knowledge, art does not try to prove something specifically. It works simultaneously as a reflective and propositional instrument to discuss our human condition. It has always functioned as such, since cave painting. The work of an artist is about shifting perspectives, changing positions, expanding in multiple directions – sometimes to the point that it becomes difficult even to call it art. It is, by its very nature, slippery.

As well as presenting and discussing the intentions of the work, it is an important feature of the work of an artist to detect shifts in ideas about our human condition and make available these subtle innovations through art, or other societal systems. What influences our perception and social / cultural relations are both the type of information delivered to us, and the forms of communication that deliver it.

There is a constant tension between what an artist “adds” to the continuum of life, creating a narrative or an aesthetic experience where there was none, and what other systems governing our society (media, technology, science, law – just to name a few) “subtract” from our multifaceted, complex reality, in order to make complex issues graspable to the majority. Both art and its counterparts generate the conditions for this communication to happen – they act not only on the content, but also on the structures delivering that content. In some cases, the information (aesthetic, experiential, cognitive) is also transposed from one system to another. That is to say, the work of an artist can occupy more than one context at the same time. It may have a presence on a visual level (through an exhibition or other “visual platforms”), on an investigative / research level (through circulation of papers, reports, and acts of disclosure and debate) and on a financial / legal level (through the sale, purchase and transactions of the work itself and the information necessary for the work to exist).

There is a word of caution to be added here: the control (or we can call it “interpretation”) of an artwork is not in the hands of the artist. It resides mainly in the artwork itself, which assumes different meanings in different contexts of space / time. But ultimately, the audience of an artwork has equally a considerable control over the artwork. Never underestimate the ability of a viewer to add to or subtract from the information (visual or otherwise) presented to him or her. Always trust the audience to own the capacity to consider what it is that they are intended to see and experience. In short, the intentions of the artist could be in conflict with the expectations of

the audience, and vice versa, i.e. the artist may have expectations that could be at odds with the intention of the audience in experiencing a certain artwork.

The point above brings me to our “universal history of beauty”, of masterpieces, art geniuses and artistic movements, which has been shaped as such since academic disciplines first appeared in Europe during the 17th / 18th centuries. The western approach to visualisation and history making, its traditional output, takes for granted that all this depends on our ability to see, to receive visual information from our eyes to our brain. But it is neither true nor scientifically proven. Aesthetics, generally speaking, is when we open our sensibility to the diversity of natural and artificial forms and convert them into actual experience. Aesthetics is not a state of contemplation but a process by which we put in motion our sensibility and convert it into a concrete experience.

There is a solid neuropsychological theory, developed, amongst other scholars, by Prof. John M. Kennedy of the University of Toronto, which demonstrates that we can process visual information even if we do not have sight. Taking as an example the work of artists who have never been able to see but draw scenes in perspective, and invent picture metaphors, Prof. Kennedy asserts that to understand such ability (not uncommon in blind people) we need to reconstruct art history. To start with, we have to include touch as well as vision.

In short, we have to unlearn a great misconception, that we only “see” the world with our eyes. A new theory of aesthetics and theory of art history will assert that touch finds exactly the same surfaces in the world as sight, and that one-, two-, and three-point perspective arises from touch’s vantage point as well as vision’s, creating the necessity to rethink the meaning of perspective itself. It will lay the foundation to explore the role of other senses in the construction of our history, so far very much delimited to “visuality”, the visual construction of reality in which we are immersed. From Altamira’s cave paintings to the Renaissance and up to the modern era with contemporary art, we have shaped a legacy of art history, and history-making restricted to vision. What we have done, is to misunderstand art, perception, the perceptible world, and the base of human consciousness. It’s time to take a hard look at our assumptions, what led to them and what grew from them, and start questioning, doubting and re-forming.