

ON COGNITIVE AESTHETIC

Lars Aagaard-Mogensen

“Art only begins
where imitation ends.”
Oscar Wilde

One lesson we may take from the arts of the Post-Impressionist era is that meaning in the arts had been fatally sidetracked by the component of representation and/or reference in imitation theory. Cognition in art isn't knowledge, obtained through works of art, of something which art refers to. Nor “gathering the meaning of things” as Aristotle said, (*Poetics* 4). It's not. Concrete art has indeed opened doors into a new world in which no interpretive or sentimental meaning can be mixed, in which no fusion of outside reality and painted or sculptured reality can arise. The elimination of the “real” object therefore narrows in fact the interplay between “world” and “art”, providing much larger spaces to aesthetic activity.

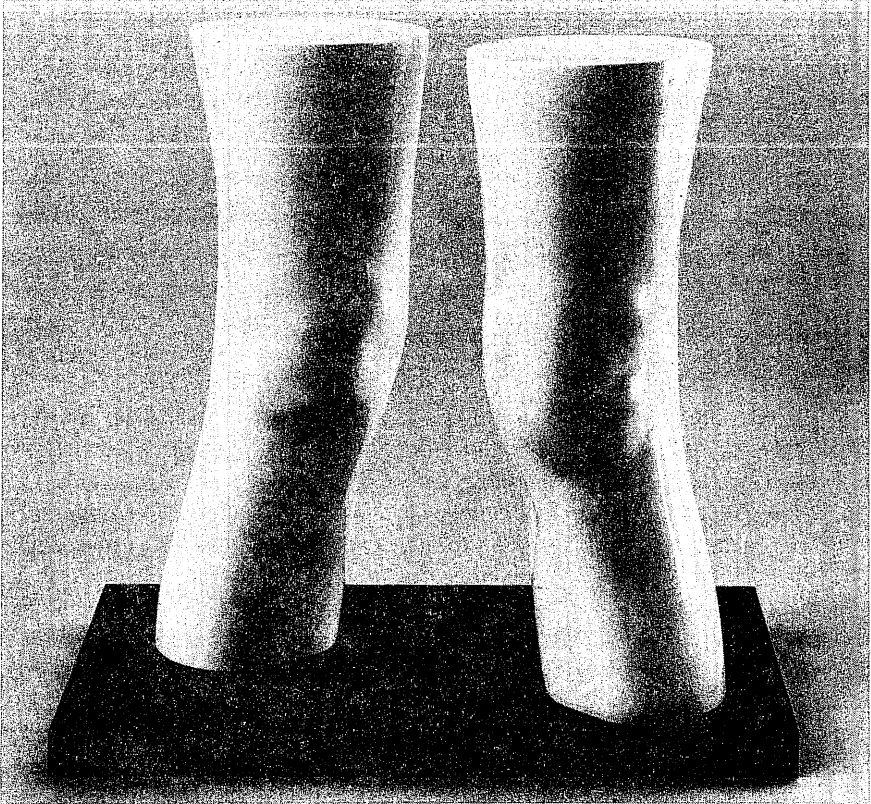
2. The discovery is that the “space” between real things and non-facsimiles, between things and their presumed imitations, the signified and the sign, the idea and the symbol, is not empty. Far from it. (Semiotics errs, *a fortiori*, as much as the imitation theory when claiming that art is exemplification (metaphorical or otherwise) or denotation)¹. When art stops imitating the world of (either innocent or confounded eye) sight, its works become startlingly literal new items in the world, new facts, new things to be seen. The work replaces nothing; it simply provides a new alternative. The figure is always in the world. It's there. The same things that inhabit the real work may migrate to the artworld with all ontological luggage intact. The change things have to suffer to enter the artworld is not banishment from reality. Artworks occupy a dimension,

which, if no more real than anything, in any event is no less real than anything else. Art entirely resists mere *relationship* to reality.

3. Minimal and Conceptual art exploded this new insight on us, but most significantly does Pop-art and Superrealism, when at their best, show to us how non-facsimiles vindicate art ontologically: what art lost by wedding representation, it reassumed at the divorce, *viz.* reality. It is way beyond the status of the paramour. What has happened is that now, at long last, the artist realized he had to take art entirely into his own hands. And he is merciless. He has made these things his, and yet at the same time he must share them with the rest of us. But fundamentally, and in spite of all his artliness, they remain very much what they are: real things. Witness the title in art.

4. Titles as means for identifying artworks, have rather fallen into disuse(s?); the catalogue hasn't been able to take over, nor has the register. Where once we said "This picture is *The Toilet of Venus* by Diego R. Velasquez, the *Rokeby Venus*" we say "These are the London legs." (or even *Untitled* or untitled, feeding expectations of lazy publics with semantic vacuities presumably harmlessly). The distance between the thing and its name is cherished (unlike the distance between propaganda and action); between the new works and their titles this distance is short-circuited; art fused the words delivering us the real thing by itself. The vast bulk of art photography endears no title. Also, in emblematics there is now a creative gap between the increasing numbers of created items and former time's outpour of representational or symbolic ones from the mythological, animal, or nature realms. If you care about words, you can stress that "concrete art" is strikingly accurate, while "non-figurative art", "non-objective art", "formal art", or "abstract art", however popular, are entire misnomers.

5. In this freshly regained position art is afforded epistemic resurrection — its genuine renaissance, if you will. In its concreteness, the new depth, quality, and sense works are to have must be generated apart from seeing and out of the stock of artists' own resources. Which is to say it is not getting ideas or observations *and* work them out, nor is it to study problems *and* construct models or solutions². Conversely, the failing artists typify those who can't make the decisive gesture of gathering life into their hands. The aesthetic artifact, a *product of a person's imagination* and a *real thing* is essentially the creative achievement³. And Achievement it is.



6. The individuality of the new artworks is the individuality of things. For instance, a Claes Oldenburg sculpture such as the infamous grave, is still like nothing but a grave for all its current absence; we know at once what it was, even though we may be less acquainted with it in this way than as a sewer repair site or the rest of our dead or the trenches of our defenders. Or, the nudes by Philip Pearlstein are off and certainly unreal by the tradition of nude painting they may suggest, but they are onward and vital by the life of the real artworld that indeed is of his work. This has perhaps, one might surmise, all along been the same with Rodin's *Danaide*, a Turner seascape, or a Goya horror⁴.

7. Art thus accomplishes in its own curious fashion collapsing the customary distinction between idea and thing. Our tendency to reduce it to an idea is a kind of perversity. The work of art is at the same time both cognition and instance. It is not a surrogate for any-

thing (be it idea, form, feeling, or reality); not an arrested expression or an emotional experience generator. It doesn't simulate the unreal, nor purport to dissimulate humane abstractions. It has much more of, while perhaps not exactly the same peculiarity as well as particularity of paradigms (not paradigm cases), in that in them the thing *is* its own idea or the idea a thing. Any idea of the thing is utterly superfluous. That is, properly grasped it serves to make the discriminations and identifications which we otherwise used to expect from a thought or a discourse. The real piece, as if "a definition", is essential (i.e. non-arbitrary); so no question survives whether a contradiction is involved in its structure transcending linguistic structure. Art here moves onto the logic of discovering — not ideas but — entire ranges of reality. The concrete artist is stubbornly, like a philosopher, insisting on his discoveries to people who share them not. The human bent for sharing values with others is stimulated, if that was thought necessary⁵.

8. Now more often than not, paradigms are abused semantically. The purple square you use to sample what "purple" means, is badly overexploited in the service of anchoring language. But what if you don't? What if you don't use a work of art to show what "work of art" or what "art" means? The viability of that project is exactly what has been so cogently denied over the past few decades⁶, that's what you can't do: no work of art shows up art, the concept of art, or the nature of art. Still a work of art being the real thing that confronts you, without exemplifying either 'the meaning of art' or what it itself means, remains nonetheless a real thing. Mere paradigmhood surely can't extinguish anything least of all real things. In this fashion I fathom the work of art as distinct from both the beloved ostensive and exhibitiv definitions. It doesn't define. Art ends in itself.

9. Here it may be significant that, that while most exhibitiv definitions in their semantic employment, depends for showing, e.g., what "purple" means heavily upon that there's more purple around, aesthetic quality and/or artistic excellence don't so depend. To show what "hat" means is semantically squeezingly void if there aren't any other hats around. But Cognitivism is entirely prepared to admit that real artworks are unique, they are original items, created and all. This odd asymmetry however reflects more about language and definitional enterprises than about paradigms. No hat, no purple patch, no work is going to give in to linguism, while that is entirely feasible for any old scrap of chat.

10. As an aside, we might remark, that seen in this way it becomes quite comprehensible that some literary art tends toward establishing itself as real things. (Beyond 'tending' it probably can't reach). Prominently metaphor functions cognitively. Metaphor doesn't exist merely in vacuums; it can only exist in actuality in a specific creative frame. There further must be no distinction between insight and its individual realization. This is why the term 'metaphor' is perhaps far better suited to characterize the genuine poetics than the much beclomored term 'symbolization'. Symbol in its way formularizes idea; it institutionalizes a specific truth and signals a more or less specifiable, paraphrasable meaning.

Metaphor, on the contrary, can't be netted within such restraints as those of symbolization. It is in-expendable. No way. Metaphor typically goes well beyond Aristotle's suggestion allocating it a capacity to intuit similarities in dissimilars, (*Poetics* 21)⁷. It involves more than mere analogy or comparison and is irreducible to any of them; it effects, it actively integrates a new being. It effects us to discover concrete realization by setting us up with means, most likely rounded up for the purposes at hand, for pondering, peering, and exploring a virginity of sense⁸. Engaging one thing to foster insight into another is a distinctive cognitive competency (familiar enough from experience of learning anything whatever, cf. note 17, -- which at a stroke spoils the psychologists' pet notion of intellectual operations as interiorized actions), providing simultaneous grasp of more than one thing (unlike perceptual ditto, *vide* the duck-rabbit). It's a gimlet plunged into the unknown. Again, the creative challenge is strong and persistent; what the artist throws at us, is personal and concerns him and us directly.

11. The asemantic works of arts, i.e. of painting, of sculpture, of music, of architecture, &c., are not signs translatable into other signs, but they could -- if only by the creative feat -- be transmuted into real things. Real things attain identity without denoting (or resembling) anything. Nor are real things *about* anything. The interior unity and consistency of the art-thing is not the order of a proposition, then. Insight already awarded caricature and parody separate designations. Artism always will transcend linguism. Calling in strings of works to substitute for propositions is inviting intellectual fiasco, in perpetration of an idolous hoax.

12. Art was presumed privileged in being entitled to interpretation. Such we only too readily supply. Difficulties soon abounded. Also, this is absolutely normal for real pieces. Lots of

plain things, girls, rainbows, sunsets, raise no question of 'interpretation'. For most of us this is uncontroversially extendable to jewelry, houses, gardens and so forth.

There's nothing we say, do or make that cannot be interpreted. Readily. There's nothing ideology cannot exploit if it can get away with it. The word, that presumptuous surrogate for body; we might say that our interpretations never are quite adequate to our works. And to show this is precisely the function of a bold and seldom discouraging inclination to ponder our works, to explore each of the qualities they bid to us. The lover finds himself discovering still more qualities with his beloved. Thereby we realize the continuous and indeed inevitable incompleteness of all ideological schemes — demanding a continuous redoing of our thinking about artworks as about any other thing. Perhaps we can even rid ourselves of the compulsive confidence in them.

13. Conceding that works of art are *real* things clearly offers the advantage of eliminating systematic uncertainty concerning identifying valuable works of art. It ably captures any requisite ontological requirements. That it is new facts that the arts provide, makes it entirely senseless to oppose perception of them for the purposes of factual object recognition and for aesthetic ambience. It's an alien contrast, — injected perhaps by dogmatic and unrealistic philosophies.

Aesthetic qualities aren't emerging or dependent qualities⁹. Because of unrealistic ontological models some analysis of aesthetic qualities into so-called non-aesthetic qualities (or properties) should not be confused with true statements about these qualities. Ontological reductionism, whether brief or thorough, is one scheme we need to resist. The more so as the rule of reality marshaled by paradigms induces modesty. Here the identity of any particular thing can naturally only be established in virtue of what the thing *is*, and it cannot be identified as what it is "partially" or what it is not. What it is is what everything else is *not*. The contention to identify, say, a great work of art in some "neutral" or "minimal" way (e.g. as "material object" or "physical entity"), that is, without ascertaining the actual possession of the qualities which make it the great work of art that it is, is obviously totally insufficient for anyone to have identified a great work of art. In brief, a thing, any item, is only identifiable by and only conclusively so by *all* the qualities it has. However, once fully identified there cannot remain an open question.

14. On these grounds art-things accommodate valuation straightforwardly. We can see that aesthetic qualities are factual (and their statement complies with factual retractability)¹⁰ in rather more serious ways than supposed by e.g. descriptivist and ascriptivist accounts. In expanding the argument of the preceding paragraph a bit, let us suppose that a dispute arises about whether some sculpture, say, by Frank Gallo is very good or merely mediocre. None of these disputants can claim the piece *really* is either or, since what they both, as non-cognitivists, claim is that really sculpturally very good and mediocre aren't qualities of any piece. If we grant them their premisses how can they each assure himself that the piece he is really talking about is what he is denying his opponent's argument access to, or believes his argument denies, since the one quality which he disagrees with him about is, by his own admission, not really in the piece? Obviously, these people have sacrificed hook, line and sinker the very stuff of their talk. Not a very rational thing to do. Defying all human purposes of conversation, leaving only an exercise in sound-production¹¹.

15. Thus informed, the key terms of aesthetics, such as 'work of art', 'good', 'beautiful', 'interpretation', 'quality', &c., coheres neatly with what I conceive as Realism; as distinguished from any sort of Scepticism, Subjectivism, and Relativism (including Traditionalism)¹², Cognitivism in aesthetics thus yields to admissible cognitive requirements :

- (A) The aesthetical judgment is cognitive if and only if a) it is either true or false and b) if its truth or falsity is ascertainable by any person who is apprised of the relevant facts.

Clause (b) of course is designed to exclude that the truth or falsity of the judgment depends on the peculiarities of the person who makes the judgment or on those of the culture in which he was reared. While being 'apprised of the relevant facts' may be negatively characterized, in which I entirely agree with Frank Sibley, such that "Indeed, it would be absurd to require, for a thing to be really ϕ , that ϕ must be discernible by beings lacking the obviously relevant knowledge and experience"¹³. It is absurd, e.g., to maintain that meaning *is not* in language since infants fail to discern it, and equally absurd to deny aesthetic qualities reality since art-world-aliens fail to discern them. Not even hard-core Idealists purport that blind people can see¹⁴. And positively characterized 'being apprised of the relevant facts' signals that enough evidence, conclusive evidence

is at hand unchallenged by reasonable doubt, where contingently enough, 'enough evidence' (or 'good reason') is sustained in the recalcitrance of 'facts'¹⁵.

Thus it is already implied by Cognitivism that communicability of judgment is founded on conditions of identification of things and incorrigibility of given judgments as I have outlined them. Common aesthetic judgment is cognitive, hence, in no less epistemic status than judgment in any other human enterprise.

Two clarifications spring to mind. Most of the time 'evidence' isn't at all *mot juste*; when you've got it right under your nose, ear or eye, you don't confront evidence of quality, but quality. Secondly, there's nothing specifically human about enterprising in art or anywhere else; it just so happens that humans also are enterprising judgmentally.

16. This may be surprising, but all the same hardly mysterious. Appropriately enough, Cognitivism is tenable without postulating any (cognitive) faculty or mode of awareness apart from what humans admissibly, on independent grounds, are endowed with¹⁶. I submit that "the obviously relevant knowledge and experience" is obtained no other way; and you don't neither be dumb, nor defectively equipped perceptually to fail to ascertain aesthetic quality. Of course you can discover or learn to see something. That doesn't mean that that something isn't there to be seen. It means if you didn't learn to see it, you'd miss it. Your loss. Eventually for us all. Rhombic, say, may be unknown to a savage, whose experience yet contains designs of relevant kinds, while no doubt he can come to ascertain this is so.

17. The question of "How do you know φ ?" is then logically distinct from "What φ you know" and this φ is true. Nor does it compare at all to a question like "What makes a beauty beautiful?" For example, we know quite well that it is a pretty woman walking down the street sporting her charms, without making enigma out of how we come by this knowledge — there can be no doubt about it. Despite preciseness, neither she nor the concrete artwork formulates a figure or an object. She is parading or promenading her charms much as the concrete work of art is confronting. Both mute you. Ascertainment suffices. The usual "classy" flow of critical remarks is bluntly disappropriated. Anyway it seldom transcends using the artwork as a pious excuse for a litany of associations, or as Wilde sardonically put it "Criticism is the only civilized form of autobiography". Obviously, you need relevant knowledge and experience

to ascertain this is so. If not, perception is schemed idling about, its end as well as art's is defeated. That she possesses feminine charms is what you know reflects aptly the overall insight in which neither she nor the surrealist work depict, they *realize* beauty and art, respectively.

Aesthetic value -- beauty is its own excuse for being, so is real art. It's analogous to the difference between the quote and the personal statement. Every educator knows this. Our learners are not allowed to get by anymore by merely parroting their books and teachers. You haven't learned well enough, we tell them, if you can't put the darn thing in your very own words¹⁷. Learners are supposed to learn to think, not to learn *about* thinking.

18. Some Relativists may wish to object that the fact that value inheres in every work of art makes an absurdity of the history of criticism and taste. Not so. We might as well say that war makes an absurdity of history. Either claim is wholly unrealistic. It is a strange lover who doesn't value his beloved. The supreme purpose of art criticism could not be to interpret or to persuade someone else into a preconceived scheme¹⁸; rather it must be to engage in mutual inquiry and exploration. As an actor who is not acting or is acting poorly merely clutters the stage, the interpreter too easily subverts the work to a platform. Superimpositional schemes persuade us to controlling and dehumanizing interests. They deafen you to discovery. But unlike the new art, language is characteristically discarded after its purpose is achieved, and we need not accommodate divergences of past criticism and tastes¹⁹, but much rather the works themselves.

19. In closing, I may reiterate, that experientially speaking the new work qualities may be unfamiliar -- and certainly untraditional. The concrete works are frequently life-sized and when confronted they really become realities. Even a work *en miniature* by a Robert Graham or a Jacques Verduyn occupy a space that confirms their existence plentifully. To a point actually where the figurines merge "their" world with "ours". Their figures don't mean, but they are themselves something real, face to face with us charged with imagination and creation. They mean nothing beyond themselves, they are "merely" concrete corporeals, and must be perceived as such. Surely they are each utterly closed, shut off, because nothing else is like it; nothing else can explain it. They cannot be excused. They do not deliver a picture, a reproduction of reality, but through mighty artistry, and perhaps by a sly twist of the concept of

reproduction into non-facsimiles, they create fresh reality.

20. The artist aims with the direct thrust of actual reality at individuality. Once and for all for one and all. The failing artist merely lifeless generality. The trouble with his work, a non-work or a poor piece, is, it is apart from art, "interested" and "bystander", not of it. If you muster patience enough to have some acquaintance with concrete art at large, you drop the ideologically injected shyness of the bizarre and acquire a rather striking cognizance of the kinship which exists, not between such art and the nature or our ideals once expected, but between artworks themselves. The new works conquer our immediate environment whereas the monuments of the past merely tagged on to it. Warren Lee and Allen Jones, e.g., don't make furniture in a style; they give you the table that *is* the work. They supercede even nature as in Christo's wrappings, or make reality of art *par excellence* as Andy Warhol's Mona Lisas. The work, every work, then takes its place in the history of our experiences not compared to, but as it should be alongside nudes, shoes, equestrians, food, and other works. Art has thus enriched latterday reality and created history albeit to modest extent as yet, on its own. Such are truly 20th century contributions to culture²⁰.

Washington University
St. Louis

NOTES

¹ See "What's the Difference?" and references, *Semiotica* 15 (1975): 171-178, and "Unfakables II", *Danish Yearbook of Philosophy* 15 (1978): 106-113; Joseph Margolis "Art As Language", *The Monist* 58 (1974): 175-186; and Monroe C. Beardsley "What is an Aesthetic Quality?", *Theoria* 39 (1973): 58-71.

² Cf. "Innovation on Vanity Fair", *Wittgenstein, the Vienna Circle and Critical Rationalism*, ed. Hal Berghel, Adolf Hübner & Eckehard Köhler, Wien 1979: 390-392; the problem based view also seems favored by off-beat writers such as T. W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, N.Y. 1976, p. 213.

³ Cf. "The Definition of 'Art'", *Dialogos* X, no. 27 (1974): 39-55. See also Jan Aler "Schooling for Creativity", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 23 (1964): 81-95; Jack Glickman "Creativity in the Arts", *Culture and Art*, ed. Lars Aagaard-Mogensen, Atlantic

Highlands, NJ, 1976 : 130–146; and Paul Ziff “A Creative Use of Language”, *New Literary History* 4 (1972) : 107–118.

⁴“When Goya rejected the Eighteenth century he was in the same situation as the other revolutionary spirits of the age. But he did not tear off the calendar and embrace the next political faith. He was a destructive moralist without politics; he dealt in terms of flesh and blood and his criticisms of society are so basic that there is no room for an ideology, and that is why he has no date. For Goya leans on nothing.” — a quote whose author and source are best served unmentioned, because so unmittigatedly snatched out of its context to be useful here.

⁵Also suggested by T.T. Lafferty in “Empiricism and Objective Relativism in Value Theory”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 46 (1949) : 147; though Jerome Stolnitz pedestrianized the stuff, he failed to produce significant comment on that, “On Objective Relativism in Aesthetics”, *ibid.* 57 (1960); 261–276.

⁶Cf. “The Definition of ‘Art’”, *op. cit.*

⁷Cf. his *Rhetoric* III iv & x.

⁸Monroe C. Beardsley is I believe on to this when saying that the metaphor transforms a property (actual or attributed) into a sense, it has something of a built-in self-controversion, it creates meaning, “The Metaphorical Twist”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 22 (1962) : 293–307. See also Timothy Binkley “On the Truth and Probity of Metaphor”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33 (1974) : 171–180; Beardsley’s “Metaphor and Falsity”, *ibid.* 35 (1976) : 218–222; and my “To Fit Terms to Qualities”, *Zeitschrift für Aesthetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, (1983).

⁹Beardsley “The Descriptivist Account of Aesthetic Attributions”, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 28 (1974) : 336–352; Margolis “Works of Art Are Physically Embodied and Culturally Emergent Entities”, *Culture and Art*, *op. cit.* 32–45. On this issue see also Göran Hermerén “The Existence of Aesthetic Qualities”, *Modality and Morality and Other Problems of Sense and Nonsense*, Lund 1973 : 64–76.

¹⁰Cf. “Factual and Logical Incorrigeability”, *Danish Yearbook of Philosophy* 9 (1972) : 7–14.

¹¹Cf. “Real Art and Constructed Reality”, *Restant* 8 (1980) : 235–238.

¹²Cf. "Innovation on Vanity Fair", *op. cit.*, and "About Traditionalist Culturism", *Art in Culture*, Gent 1982.

¹³Frank N. Sibley "Objectivity and Aesthetics", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary volume 42 (1968) : 31-54. Cf. Hermerén : "It would be absurd to conclude that the work of art does not have the properties we do not notice or mention in our descriptions, analyses, and interpretations", "Aesthetic Qualities, Value and Emotive Meaning", *Theoria* 39 (1973) : 98.

¹⁴I've pondered some Idealist contentions about 'real' in "Of Idealism : On Schiller's and Schopenhauer's Aesthetics", *Darshana International* 18 (1978) : 52-64.

¹⁵Cf. "Personal Identity", *Agora* 2, no. 2 (1973) : 55-59; and Wayne C. Booth *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, Chicago (1974), esp. Ch. 4.

¹⁶Margolis "Moral Cognitivism", *Ethics* 85 (1974-75) : 136-141. 'Factual quality' favors, on independent grounds, Realism as well, cf. "Caught Without an Answer", *Philosophical Studies* 28 (1975) : 67-70.

¹⁷Cf. "The Convertor -- a Frame of Mind", *Revue de Phonétique Appliquée* 46/47 (1978) : 87-91; "Quotation and Common Sense", *Worldmakings' Ways*, Gent 1982.

¹⁸Or as Kant phrased it in "Was ist Aufklärung ?" : "Satzungen und Formeln, diese mechanischen Werkzeuge eines vernünftigen Gebrauchs oder vielmehr Missbrauchs seiner [jedem einzelnen Menschen] Naturgaben, sind die Fusseschellen einer immerwährenden Unmündigkeit." (Akademie Ausgabe, vol. 8 : 36.)

¹⁹"Innovation on Vanity Fair", *op. cit.*

²⁰A few basic moves of this paper appeared in *CC77 : International Workshop on the Cognitive Viewpoint*, ed. M. de Mey, R. Pinxten, M. Poriau, & F. Vandamme, Gent 1977, entitled "Aesthetical Cognitivism". Now, both revised and substantially expanded, reprints with the courteous permission of the Communication and Cognition Research Group. For further discussion, see *Our Art* and "Seeing and Picturing Brainslices", *Communication and Cognition*, both forthcoming.