



Aesthetics and Philosophy of the Arts

## The British Avant-Garde: A Philosophical Analysis

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**ABSTRACT:** British Avant-Garde art, poses a challenge to traditional aesthetic analysis. This paper will argue that such art is best understood in terms of Wittgenstein's concept of "seeing-as," and will point out that the artists often use this concept in describing their work. This is significant in that if we are to understand art in terms of cultural practice, then we must actually look at the practice. We will discuss initiatives such as the work of Damien Hirst, most famous for his animals in formaldehyde series, and that of Simon Patterson, who warps diagrams, e.g., replacing the names of stops on London Underground maps with those of philosophers. Cornelia Parker's idea that visual appeal is not the most important thing, but rather that the questions that are set up in an attempt to create an "almost invisible" art are what are central, will also be discussed. Also, if we concur with Danto's claims that "contemporary art no longer allows itself to be represented by master narratives," that Nothing is ruled out.", then it is indeed fruitful to understand art in terms of seeing-as. For application of this concept to art explains what occurs conceptually when the viewer shifts from identifying a work, as an art object, and then as not an art object, and explains why nothing is ruled out.

Much of contemporary art, as many have noted, has posed a challenge to much of traditional philosophical aesthetic analysis. British Avant-Garde art is no exception. This paper will argue that the "British Avant-Garde" art is best understood in terms of Wittgenstein's concept of "seeing-as,"<sup>(1)</sup> and will also point out that the artists and their critics often implicitly or explicitly use Wittgenstein's concept of seeing-as in describing their work. It is quite significant that both groups do this, in that if we are to understand art in terms of cultural practice as some suggest, then we must, I believe, actually look at the practice.<sup>(2)</sup> It is interesting to note that Wittgenstein himself in discussing aesthetics suggests that cultural practice is significant.<sup>(3)</sup> It is also my contention that if we concur with Danto's claim that "The great master narratives which first defined traditional art, and then modernist art, have not only come to an end but that contemporary art no longer allows itself to be represented by master narratives at all.", and with his claim that "Ours is a moment, at least . . . in art, of deep pluralism and total tolerance. Nothing is ruled out."<sup>(4)</sup>, then it is indeed fruitful to understand art in terms of seeing-as. For application of the concept of seeing-as to art explains what actually occurs conceptually and perceptually when the viewer or viewers shifts from identifying the same work at one time, as an art object, and at another time as not an art object, and explains why nothing is ruled out.<sup>(5)</sup>

A recent article in *Art News* discusses the British Avant-Garde artists in terms of their "ruling out nothing."<sup>(6)</sup> It discusses grass roots initiatives such as the 1988 "Freeze" show organized by Damien Hirst, and that of Simon Patterson, who warps diagrams, e.g., replacing the names of train stops on London Underground maps with those of philosophers, and others. Cornelia Parker's idea that visual appeal is not the most important thing, but rather the questions that are set up in an attempt to create an art that she describes as "almost invisible" are what are central is discussed. The "British Avant-Garde" artists have in common the making of ordinary objects into art objects.

In order to discuss some of these artists and their art in terms of Wittgenstein's concept of seeing-as, I must first analyze his concept. Seeing-as, I wish to argue, is a broader notion than Wittgenstein envisioned; one which includes applicability to art. Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* claims that seeing-as is distinct from both simple seeing and noticing. Wittgenstein tells us specifically that there are two uses of the term "see."<sup>(7)</sup> He points out that seeing-as differs from seeing in that one can see something *as* one thing at one moment and see it *as* something else at another moment, without there being a change in the perceptual properties of what one sees. He points to Jastrow's example of the duck-rabbit picture; one can see the duck-rabbit as a duck at one moment and as a rabbit at another. When one suddenly sees the duck-rabbit as a rabbit after first seeing it as a duck, one becomes aware of its rabbit *aspect*.<sup>(8)</sup> When one sees the drawing as a duck, the configuration of lines is looked at in a different way from when one sees it as a rabbit. Wittgenstein goes on to tell us that seeing-as is an amalgam of thinking and seeing.<sup>(9)</sup> As we shall see the British Avant-Garde artists require us to view their works in terms of (and the works themselves are) an amalgam of thinking and seeing.

We should note that seeing-as is not a combination of first seeing and then doing something; rather, it is described as being a simple act (although, not mere perception). Wittgenstein denies that two things occur when seeing-as occurs; being "struck" by an impression is not looking plus thinking.<sup>(10)</sup> And he asks in reference to the dawning of an aspect, "Do I really see something different each time, or do I interpret what I see in a different way?"<sup>(11)</sup> He responds once again that one really sees something different, that interpreting plus seeing is not occurring.

In accord with this, Wittgenstein states that what one perceives "in dawning of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects."<sup>(12)</sup> Consequently, seeing-as involves connecting a present object with ones previously known. Hence, one might say that the present object is a representative of past objects. (We might say that in some cases the present object is a representative of past narratives or theories or contexts.) This would allow in some cases for present artworks to be related to earlier ones as Carroll and Levinson suggest, (even if there are no *master* narratives), and allow for Danto's contention that there must be some context involving at least some nonvisible elements that makes the artwork art.<sup>(13)</sup> We can also think here of others who would concur. Think of Gombrich's claim that "the innocent eye is a myth", and that it is expectations which sort and model the incoming messages . . ."<sup>(14)</sup> Think of the claims of Hochberg and Neisser in psychology that we are not passive to external stimuli, but that our sensory systems "actively transform their stimulus inputs . . ."<sup>(15)</sup>

Before accepting my contention that seeing-as is a broader notion than Wittgenstein envisioned,<sup>(16)</sup> we must look more closely at Wittgenstein's characterization of seeing-as. One might object that my contention ignores Wittgenstein's insistence that it would be meaningless to speak of seeing something as itself; that it would be meaningless, for

example, to speak of seeing x as a fork when it is in fact a fork. Wittgenstein seems to give us two reasons for denying this possibility. First, he asserts that a claim such as "Now I am seeing this as a knife and fork" would not be understood,<sup>(17)</sup> whereas one could meaningfully say that one sees the duck-rabbit, now as a duck and now as a rabbit. His second claim seems to be that it would be meaningless to say "Now it's a fork" because such a statement could not include any reference to a change in aspect.<sup>(18)</sup> His objection does not strike me as conclusive.<sup>(19)</sup> Indeed, we would not normally say that we see a fork as a fork, but this does not entail that such a statement would be false or senseless. For example, there would ordinarily be no point in saying to someone "I am a human being." The person addressed would probably not "understand" what one was saying, in the sense of not knowing *why* it was being said. The lack of "understanding" is based on the inappropriateness of the statements in a given context, but not on any nonsensicality; Think of Shylock in the *Merchant of Venice*.

What then of Wittgenstein's second contention that seeing-as does not occur in such cases as seeing a fork because such cases do not involve the possibility of a change of aspect? P.F. Strawson argues in response to this position that in all cases there is the possibility of a change of aspect, which would make us see the object in question as an object of a different kind. Strawson suggests the following example: a man looks at a yellow flowering bush against a stone wall; however, he sees the bush as yellow chalk marks scrawled on the wall. But the next day he sees it normally, that is he sees it as a flowering bush, and of course most, if not all, people see it as that.<sup>(20)</sup> We might argue that it is precisely because there is a possibility in all cases of a change of aspect that it is possible for ordinary objects to become art objects—as in the case of Edward Weston's photographs of green peppers, or Duchamp's urinal, and in the case of the British Avant-Garde artists.

Let us look, in light of this, at Damien Hirst, one of the best known of the "British Avant-Garde." In an interview with Hirst, Hirst discusses his spot paintings, and states that "I want them to be an endless series, but I don't want to make an endless series."<sup>(21)</sup> Again, in Wittgensteinian terms he wants them to be seen as an endless series, even though in a literal sense they are not. And in discussing his dead animals in formaldehyde series (for which he is perhaps best known) he states that if you can cut an animal in half you can see what's on the inside and outside simultaneously. "It's beautiful," he says. "The only problem is that it's dead."<sup>(22)</sup> He says that his work should attract you and repel you at the same time. This is possible again if we apply the concept of seeing-as to it. He says that, "What's sad is that you look at my cows cut-up in formaldehyde, they have more personality than any cows walking about in fields, that's another reason people get annoyed; it's easier to walk into a butcher's shop . . ."<sup>(23)</sup> In other words, in the context of the butcher store many of us are not repelled (although animal rights activities are, of course), and yet we might be repelled by Hirst's animals; and so associations, the special mental backgrounds, are all. These special mental backgrounds may not always be of the same type <sup>¾</sup> sometimes they may be identifying historical narratives <sup>¾</sup> a la Carroll, or institutional frameworks a la Dickie, or sometimes they may be more like family resemblances. To reiterate, Wittgenstein's contention that in the dawning of an aspect and in particular in the dawning of seeing an object in its art aspect, the aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects or narratives seems to be correct.

I think it is quite clear that Wittgenstein's restriction of the notion of seeing-as to such rare phenomena as the duck-rabbit is unwarranted. Seeing-as is indeed a wide notion, one

necessary for seeing an ordinary object as an art object. Let us again examine the case of seeing a fork as fork. In this case, one is not merely noticing similarities, but "providing a certain background." For similarities between forks are also limited. One must be mentally constructing the background of use in order to classify a fork as a fork. For if one were thinking of the object's material one might classify spoons and forks together as silver objects. Indeed, reference to a background is needed to explain why we *notice* some similarities and not others. For every case, at a certain point the similarities stop and one simply sees something as being of a certain kind (as being an instance of an art object, for example). In other words, we might claim that in all cases of seeing-as the mind looks beyond what it immediately perceives. This analysis is also in accord with Hagberg's claim that "the very distinction . . . between perception and description, does not on investigation prove as clear or as structurally sound, as it should if it is to serve as a linguistic-perceptual foundation for an aesthetic theory."<sup>(24)</sup>

We might suggest that there is a sense in which it would be more illuminating to say that seeing-as creates similarities rather than depends on similarities antecedently existing. An example of this might be the "British Avant-Garde" artist Adam Chodzko, who advertised in the personal section of a newspaper for "The God Look Alike Contest."<sup>(25)</sup> The art produced consists of the photographs sent in by the nine individuals who replied. These include a woman in a red corset, and as the art critic Richard Dorment said "a gentleman who either misread Chodzko's advertisement or else genuinely believes that his penis is divine,"<sup>(26)</sup> and also the winner of the contest, who was an inmate of Rampton Mental Hospital who had killed a priest. We might ask how could something non-physical, completely transcendent, that is God, have a look alike? We might answer, only if someone sees one self as God. Also, of course, in looking at these photographs in light of the contest, one sees them differently than if one had no knowledge of the contest. One does not just think of them differently; there is a dawning of an aspect.

Let us now take a closer look at some other British Avant-Garde artists. Simon Patterson, as mentioned, is perhaps best known for his art in which he replaced the names of train stops on London Underground maps with those of philosophers, saints, footballers, film stars, engineers, etc. It is entitled "The Great Bear" (1992). To be more specific, the station names on the Central line for example, are philosophers from "Albert Einstein" to "Wittgenstein". "The Great Bear" was exhibited in an exhibition entitled "Seeing the Unseen." Here, the idea of seeing the unseen makes conceptual sense if we think of Wittgenstein's notion of seeing-as, for again, if we see the duck/rabbit as a rabbit we have, on my analysis, unseen rabbits in mind which we then see in the rabbit aspect of the duck/rabbit. As one critic states we are invited by Patterson to make endless word and visual associations. We are told that "he loves the potential malleability of facts."<sup>(27)</sup> I might suggest that facts are malleable, only if we think in terms of seeing-as. Matthew Collings, another art critic, asks what precisely is the relationship of "The Great Bear" to the conventional map of the London Underground? "Where exactly is the art in 'The Great Bear'? Is it the concept or the execution? Is it about words or places?"<sup>(28)</sup> We might say here that with the concept of seeing-as we can answer Collings' questions; for we can claim that it is not an either/or choice, that we see the places of the map in terms of the words, that we see the execution in terms of the concepts; that we are not forced to choose. Pilar Corrias of the Lisson Gallery states that "as always in Patterson's work, the chosen form is inseparable from the idea; the work is as visual as it is cerebral, . . ."<sup>(29)</sup> We might notice Corrias' use of the term "inseparable"; this implies that the form and the idea are, as we discussed earlier, in Wittgenstein's terms an amalgam.

Another art critic, Sarah Kent says that Patterson's "work is like the physical embodiment of ruminative thought-conceptual art made concrete."<sup>(30)</sup> In other words, again as Wittgenstein might say, in looking at Patterson's work we are not involved in noticing plus thinking when seeing Patterson's work as a metaphor for art, but rather it actually becomes a metaphor for art. It is as Kent says, "conceptual art made concrete", not conceptual art where one first looks or notices, and then thinks.

In "Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View", Parker, another British Avant-Garde artist, had the British Army explode a garden shed, which she had filled with tools, etc. She then gathered the fragments and formed them into rough shape of a house, suspended around a light bulb from the ceiling of London's Chisenhale Gallery. She says, "With both the shed and the silver plate, those were things that might have had sentimental value. I gave them another history, and then when I hung them they started to look like natural objects."<sup>(31)</sup> Here, I would like to emphasize Parker's remark that she gave them another history. This again has echoes of Wittgenstein's seeing-as, as in the case of the duck/rabbit, which in my analysis is seen as a duck when we dispositionally have previously seen ducks in mind, so here when we see the silver non-sentimentally we have different paradigms in mind, than when we see it sentimentally. And so we might say in Wittgensteinian terms that seeing it as art is itself imposing a particular order where there could be other orders, just as in the duck/rabbit, the physical lines themselves do not impose the order. And so just as the duck/rabbit can be both duck and rabbit, even though ducks can not be rabbits nor rabbits ducks, so Parker's art can be both art and not art. And so with Wittgenstein's analysis applied to art, in agreement with people like Danto, etc. we have art which is defined in part by the viewer and not by the object. This analysis would also be akin to Danto's recent contention that the viewer's or artist's practical interests may be a legitimate basis for an analysis of art. And with his claim that "The powerful distinction drawn in the great originating works of philosophical aesthetics, between aesthetic and practical judgments, has tended to define the default state of the discipline in such a way as to stultify, by stipulation, the propensity to ask what practical utility aesthetic experience might have."<sup>(32)</sup>

And so we might conclude that, as the aesthetician Richard Wolheim said, "Wittgenstein would seem always to have remained of the opinion that, whereas the various false views of language can be stated or lend themselves to assertion, the true view is something that has to be seen - it remains a *view*."<sup>(33)</sup> And so analogously, in aesthetics the true view is something that has to be seen, and so any analysis of the British Avant-Garde or any other movement ultimately must be seen. And so we might argue that this is one reason why the empirical or practice in aesthetics is so important because in order to *see* the true view in aesthetics or the true view with regard to particular works, we must actually see or hear aesthetic objects. We might emphasize Wittgenstein's advise that we must not *theorize* as to how a word functions or analogously as to how an art work functions, but to look at its use and learn from that, that we need to look at particular art objects in order to productively theorize about art.<sup>(34)</sup>

## Notes

(1) I might mention that this is particularly important because scant research has been done on the applicability of Wittgenstein's concept of "seeing-as" to recent contemporary art.

(2) Carroll claims that "the means for identifying a new object as part of the corpus of art are internal to the practice of art . . ." Noel Carroll, "Art, Practice, and Narrative", *The Monist* 71 (1988): 143, 145.

- (3) Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, edited by Cyril Barret (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967), p. 8.
- (4) Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art*, (Princeton University Press, 1997), p. xiii, p. xiv.
- (5) Application of the concept of seeing-as to art would also help explain why objections such as Robert Stecker's to the constructivist position in art are not salient. Stecker claims that interpreting an object in certain ways will only "get people to think of it as having the property in question," but that if that is true "the object already has the property." (See Stecker, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 55:1 Winter, 1997.) On an analysis of art in terms of seeing-as, although the properties of the object itself do not change a la the duck/rabbit drawing, yet none-the-less the entity discussed does change. This topic, however, must be saved for another paper.
- (6) Jeffrey Kastner, "Great Britain '94. British Art Today", *Art News*, (September, 1994): 146.
- (7) Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., trans. C.E.M. Anscombe (London: Basil Blackwell and Mott, Ltd., 1958), p. 193e.
- (8) Ibid., Wittgenstein refers to becoming aware of an aspect of something, as the "noticing of an aspect", or the "dawning of an aspect.")
- (9) Ibid., p. 212e.
- (10) Ibid., p. 211e.
- (11) Ibid., p. 212e. This analysis would also explain why although the identification of art in terms of cultural practice seems the least problematic of theories, it does not always seem as if in identifying x as art, interpretation is occurring, for if we are right then as Wittgenstein contends interpreting plus seeing does not occur, but the process is an amalgam.
- (12) Ibid., p. 212e.
- (13) See Noel Carroll, "Historical Narratives and the Philosophy of Art", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 51:3 (Summer, 1993), and Arthur Danto, *After The End of Art*.
- (14) See Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 298.
- (15) Henry Gleitman, *Psychology* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1981), p. 246.
- (16) Wittgenstein states in seeming opposition to the *Investigations* in *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Vol. I, 91, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, that 'seeing something as something' is frequently formed, and felt as a need, when we are talking about a work of art.

(17) Ibid., p. 195e.

(18) Ibid.

(19) Stephen Mulhall agrees with my claim that Wittgenstein's concern with aspect dawning should not be construed as applying to narrow phenomenon. (*On Being in the World Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects*).

(20) P.F. Strawson, "Imagination and Perception", ed. Lawrence Foster and J.W. Swanson (University of Massachusetts Press, 1970), p. 46.

(21) Gagosian Gallery reprint from exhibition catalogue, Stuart Morgan, *Damian Hirst: No Sense of Absolute Corruption*, 1996, p.2.

(22) Ibid., p. 5.

(23) Ibid.

(24) G. L. Hagberg, *Art as Language: Wittgenstein, Meaning and Aesthetic Theory*, (Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 189.

(25) Richard Dorment, "Hypnotised by a Handful of Stars", *The Daily Telegraph*, London, 10 April, 1996.

(26) Ibid.

(27) *Evening Standard Magazine*, 15 July, 1994.

(28) Matthew Collings, "A Guide to Invisible London", *The Independent*, Newspaper (September 25, 1994):33.

(29) Pilar Corrias, press release on Simon Patterson, Lisson Gallery, London, March, 1996.

(30) Sarah Kent, reprint from *Time Out, London*, Lisson Gallery, London, April 3, 1996.

(31) Iain Gale, "Cornelia Parker: Suspending Objects and Disbelief", *Art News* (September, 1994): 151.

(32) Arthur C. Danto, "From Aesthetics to Art Criticism and Back", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 54, Number 2, Spring 1996, p. 105.

(33) Richard Wolheim, "The Art Lesson" in *On Art and the Mind*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974, p. 131.

(34) In this, I am also in agreement with Hagberg's claim that, "I tend toward the belief, consistent with Wittgenstein's later philosophy, that these issues are irreducibly complex, and that artistic meaning can no more be succinctly encapsulated or reduced to definitional formulas than can linguistic meaning." (G.L. Hagberg, *Art as Language, Wittgenstein, Meaning, and Aesthetic Theory*, (Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 7.)