Visual Hybrids and Nonconceptual Aesthetic Perception

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Abstract This essay characterizes the perception of the visual hybrid as nonconceptual, introducing the terminology of nonconceptual content theory to aesthetics. The visual hybrid possesses a radical but nonetheless exemplary aesthetic composition and is well established in culture, art, and even design. The essay supplies a philosophical analysis of the results of cross-cultural experiments, showing that while categorization or conceptual hierarchization kicks in when the visual hybrids are juxtaposed with linguistic descriptions, no conceptual scheme takes effect when participants are presented with mere visual hybrids. In isolation, the hybrids do not lend themselves to classification.

I draw four conclusions from these experimental outcomes:

1. The perception of visual hybrids follows the structure of a nonconceptual mental content, because the original categories or concepts of the hybrids' components are not combined into one, and their properties are not applied to one another, therefore none of the components reconstructs the other such that it is introduced to a new category.

2. Language freezes the hybridity of the visual hybrid into conceptuality.

3. Given that language has a freezing effect in the case of an extreme visual phenomenon such as the hybrid, it is all the more restraining in moderate artistic compositions, such as visual metaphors, in which properties of one component (the source) are applied to the other (the target). In those, nonconceptuality emerges

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from relatively organized compositions, forms, and relations, and from the dependence of objects and their properties on perceptual context.

4. Thus, the nonconceptualist terminology is suitable for the analysis of aesthetic perception in general and aesthetic perception's relation to language.

Keywords aesthetics, perception, nonconceptual content, hybrids, visual metaphors

Visual hybrids—an odd but ubiquitous phenomenon since antiquity, hard to digest at times but also fascinating—stand at an intersection between the visual sphere and language. A visual hybrid is an image composed of two or more components (usually divided into two halves) that originate in different ontological categories (fig. 1). The components of hybrids are glued to each other so to speak, with no interfusion or mix, and no transference of properties from one component to another. Consequently, their defining elements remain distinct from one another and are perceptually distinguishable—an immanent trait that is largely overlooked by most analysts of the phenomenon. The combinations of the visual hybrids are positioned along a spectrum that spans a range of forms. Some hybrids inhabit a common ontology even as their elements originate in different breeds or subgroups, such as two different animals, for example, Gadjamina, which is half elephant, half fish. Others draw together components from different ontological levels, such as humans and animals, for example, the centaur, which combines a man with a horse, or a plant with a piece of furniture. A third category of hybrids draws elements that are ontologically incongruous with one another, such as half-human, half-inanimate for example, a cyborg which combines human with machine.

The visual hybrid is a well-established phenomenon in art and other creative disciplines that are built around aesthetics, such as design. It is no wonder. One of art's main tools is composition, especially novel compositions. In its ability to transgress categories, enlarge or disturb groups, or combine ontologically distant ones, art conceived as the act of composition is able to offer its viewers the possibility of epistemological as well as ontological innovations. This impulse of compositional innovation has produced a range of images such as *Assyrian Shedu or Lamassu* (fig. 2), from the eighth century BC; the *Chimera* from 350–40 BC, which is a lion with the head of a goat arising from its back, and a tail in a form of a snake (fig. 3); the hybrid in *Lo Stregozzo* from 1520–27 (fig. 4); Larry Abramson's *Untitled* from 1999 (fig. 5); the *Hybrid* series of dishes (fig. 6) that was recently designed by Seletti studio and described in their catalog as follows: "When east and west combine. A collection that reflects ancient historic Western and Eastern ceramic production. Hybrid decorations that come from a complex past

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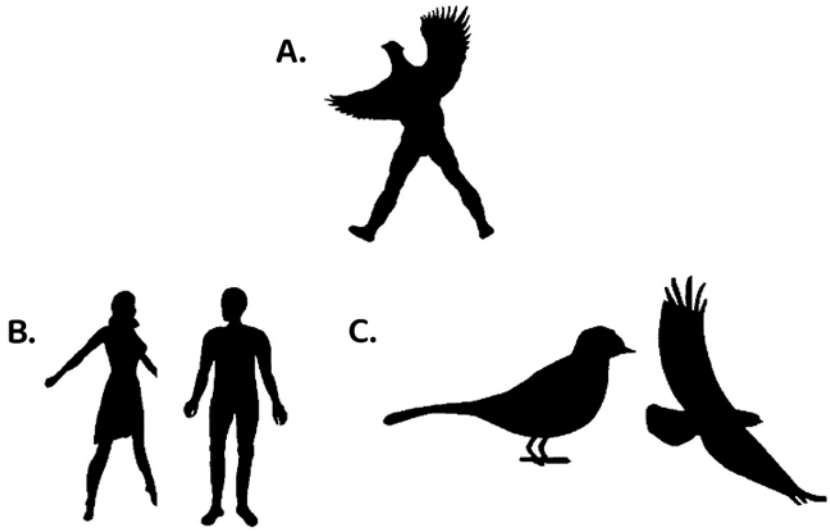

Figure 1 Visual hybrids: half-man, half-bird hybrids and their original categories. Printed with permission from Yeshayahu Shen and David Gil.

that evolve into contemporary shapes"; or *Kokon Table-Chair*, which was designed by Jurgen Bey in 1997 as part of Droog label or movement (fig. 7).

Bey's and other Droog designers' oeuvres deserve a closer look because they offer opportunities for recognizing an essential quality of some visual hybrids that is often overlooked: their nonconceptual essence. Droog's body of work is usually subsumed under *conceptual design*, drawing on Conceptual Art, whose visual medium is recruited for the delivery of a preconceived concept, thereby taking on a linguistic character. In her critical monograph *Dutch Design*, the art historian and curator Mienke Simon Thomas clarifies the choice of hybrids by Bey and other conceptualist designers using these words: "The way it was explained in the catalog was that they were furniture designers who also wanted to be 'meaning-givers': 'Their pieces of furniture are not solely a chair, a table or a cupboard. They are designed ideas . . . Not long afterward this trend became known as 'conceptual design', that is, the idea behind it was more important than the design" (Simon Thomas 2008: 223). According to Simon Thomas, Bey's work originates in a concept rather than in the material medium of design, and Bey's aim is to recruit the hybrid design piece to embody the concept. Like conceptual artworks, this structure of work affords a privileged status to the concept over the visual elements of the work. Bey's work can certainly be understood to possess a semantic charge, referring to the designer's wish to question the stability of categories of everyday aesthetics or the very

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Figure 2 Assyrian Shedu from the entrance to the throne room of the palace of Sargon II at Dur-Sharrukin (late eighth century BC).

Figure 3
The Chimera on a red-figure Apulian plate, ca. 350–340 BC.

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Figure 4 Marcantonio Raimondi or Agostino Musi, Lo Sregozzo, 1520-1527.

category of design. In this respect, he might be a meaning giver, as noted in the quote above. However, I want to suggest that Bey's conceptual mental contents notwithstanding, in order to understand what a visual hybrid is, we should not confuse conceptual content with the visual hybrid itself. Being a visual hybrid, *Kokon Table-Chair* hybrid, that is, the *complete final piece* with its very hydridic structure, *resists that kind of conceptuality that is conveyed by preexisting linguistic categories. Kokon* is neither a table nor a chair. Not only does it belong to no category due to its hydridic structure, but it also does not lend itself to conceptual apprehension as long as its hybridity is alive. Its structure is dialectic, combining the uncombined.

This resistance to conceptuality within visual hybrids is at the center of the analysis I mean to offer in this essay. I hope to prove that nonconceptuality is essential to the ontological structure of visual hybrids and their perception, and serves as a vantage point for aesthetic compositions in general. The nonconceptual content theory that originated in the philosophy of mind—"the idea that perceptual experience has a content that is nonconceptual" as framed by Christopher Peacocke (2001: 239), one of its main advocates—*has yet to be introduced to aesthetic discourse.* Nonconceptual content of perception is nonpropositional and cannot be captured by concepts but at the same time intentional and representational of ontological entities, situations, and relations. Such content thus enables us to reckon with the often-noticed gap between the perception of visual compositions and concepts or language.

I argue that the visual hybrid is a special kind of nonconceptual precept, one that has not been labeled as such in the literature. To support my case, I apply the arguments and terminology of nonconceptual content theory to

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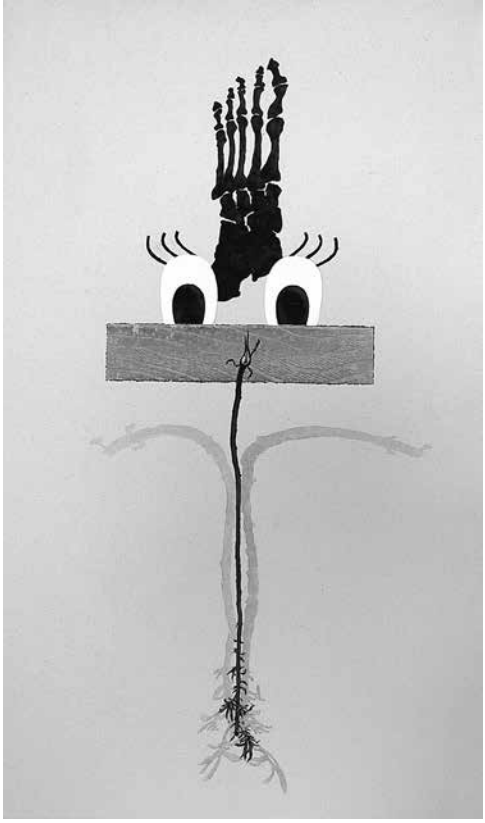

Figure 5 Larry Abramson, Untitled, 1999. Printed with permission from Larry Abramson.

Figure 6 Seletti Hybrid Series, 2020. Printed with permission from Seletti S.p.a.

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Figure 7 Jurgen Bey. Kokon Table-Chair.

the analysis of the visual hybrid. It will be made by way of three main steps that follow an introduction about the motivation of the essay to extract the essential structure of the visual hybrid against the current common overuse of the term:

1. Supplying a philosophical analysis of the findings and conclusions of cognitive experiments on the effect of language and conceptual scheme on hybrid perception, I claim that language and conceptuality are incongruent with the essential structure of the visual hybrid and disturb its hybridity. These relevant cognitive experiments show that when a visual hybrid is viewed in isolation, viewers do not revert to preexisting conceptual categories, and the conceptual hierarchy does not kick in to make sense of the image in question. In contrast, when language is involved, it operates as an organizing factor of the visual image, forcing conceptual and ontological classifications and hierarchies on the experience. This dynamic sheds light on the relationship between the linguistic and the visual, and the force of language on visual perception.

2. Drawing on these experiments I characterize the perception of hybrids as nonconceptual. I lay out my case for this nonconceptuality by juxtaposing the visual hybrid with visual metaphor. In the case of the visual hybrid, the disparate elements do not map onto one another, generating as a consequence an image that resists classification. By contrast, in visual metaphors one element operates to reframe the other, effectively introducing it to a new group and taxonomical framework.

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3. I apply the first two contentions to the structure of artworks or design works and their perception by claiming that the more resistant to conceptuality a visual composition is the more aesthetic it is. Namely, an image that generates nonconceptual perception and mental content is more artistic (or located at the center of the group of artworks) than an image that lends itself to conceptual perception.

Introduction. Why Return to the Essential Structure of Visual Hybrid?

An aesthetic study of the foundational structure and perception of visual hybrids seems especially salient in the current historical moment due to two current cultural and intellectual turns: the advent of the age of hybrids and the visual turn. First, our age has been characterized by quite a few theoreticians of post-postmodernism, ranging from Bruno Latour to Haim Hazan, as "an age of hybridization" (Thomas 2005; Hazan 2015). Latour's famous *We Have Never Been Modern* noted as early as 1993 the ways our ontological practice generates hybrids: "Every day our laboratories and our factories populate the world with hundreds of hybrids stranger than those of the day before" (Latour 1993: 115). What is more, the mass-produced material hybrids gain corresponding theories that are formulated by "those hybrid articles that sketch out imbroglios of science, politics, economy, law, religion, technology, fiction" (3). By Latour's (1993: 12) reckoning, "we have stopped being modern, if we can no longer separate the work of proliferation from the work of purification." We live in an age characterized by what Latour dubs a "proliferation of monsters." In fact, he insists, we have always lived with hybrids around us: indeed, we are hybrids ourselves, attached as we are to machines.

But in making the case for the ubiquity of hybrids, Latour, I want to suggest, runs the risk of diluting their essential qualities. The sort of post-modernist (or post-postmodernist) terminology advanced by Latour has led to an overly capacious use of the concept of *hybrid*, in which the term is invoked to name nearly every kind of eclectic combination. A representative example of the excessively capacious uses of the term *hybrid* can be found in Hajar Yasdicha's "Conceptualizing Hybridity: Deconstructing Boundaries through the Hybrid," where the author asserts that "this hybridity is woven into every corner of society, from trendy fusion cuisine to Caribbean rhythms in pop music to the hyphenated identities that signify ethnic Americans, illuminating the lived experience of ties to a dominant culture blending with the cultural codes of a Third World culture" (Yazdiha 2010: 31).

Beyond the fact that an overly broad extension of a concept risks evac-

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uating it all together of meaning, the various uses of *hybrid* more often than not fail to refer to what I am suggesting is the essential structure of hybrid. This is particularly true in the case of visual hybrids. As noted in *Hybridity: Forms and Figures in Literature and the Visual Arts*, "Over the last two decades, the unstable notion of hybridity has been the focus of a number of debates and has given rise to many publications. The term, which is often discussed in connection with such notions as métissage, creolization, syncretism, diaspora, transculturation, and inbetweenness, has become a buzzword in cultural and literary studies, and is at times used carelessly to describe a disparate body of subjects in widely differing domains." In this broad account, *hybridity* is the term applied to all forms of defiance of modernist purism (while often missing the humanist aspects of it). Against the myth of racial or cultural authenticity, "of fixed and essentialist identity" (Guignery, Pesso-Mique, and Specq 2011: 3), hybridity "embraces blending, combining, syncretism and encourages the composite, the impure, the heterogeneous and the eclectic" (1).

In contrast to this widespread postmodern promotion of cultural hybridity, an uncommon modernist stance is expressed by Haim Hazan in his *Against Hybridity*. According to Hazan (2015: 2), postmodern culture, as opposed to modernism, is manifested by a "positive, almost banal, view of the transgression and disruption of cultural boundaries." In the wake of consumerist globalization that dissolves national and cultural borders, Hazan argues, "the hybrid, . . . previously viewed as atavistic and marginal in relation to the rational and secular tenets of modernity," comes to be seen as the default cultural condition. In the waning decades of the twentieth century, postmodernity has come to be characterized as "fundamentally hybrid—a global, fluid, amorphic construct constituted by hybridization." Hybridization, according to Hazan, has become a sort of fixation in itself, one in which "elements considered as 'non-hybrids' become the targets of specific social strategies designed to distance, reject, stage, and (de)grade" (2–3). Hazan makes a good point here. As I see it, he exposes a "dialectic conversion" of the theories of visual hybrids. "Dialectic conversion" was signified by one of the most prominent philosophers of aesthetic modernism, Clement Greenberg, to note that "by driving a tendency to its farthest extreme . . . one finds oneself abruptly going in the opposite direction" (Greenberg 1986: 277). That is to say, visual hybrids, which may be, and have been, used as groundbreaking and free compositions, could be converted by postmodernism to regulative and domineering kinds of visual phenomena. In their turn, theories of visual hybrids may exclude as illegitimate various phenomena such as modernist, abstract, or purist visual works. What is relevant for us here is that language and theories

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have a lot to do with the exclusion of pure visual compositions (i.e., nonfigurative or nonconceptual). Visual compositions are excessively spoken or written about. However, language has a freezing or even oppressive effect on visual phenomena—which leads me to the second current reason to revisit the basic perception of visual hybrids.

The second relevant transformation of the contemporary historical moment is the ongoing, and very promising, visual turn that brings to closure the conceptual age that was preceded by the linguistic one. My claim for the nonconceptual structure of visual hybrids challenges the foundational claims of what has come to be known as philosophy's linguistic turn—a movement, initiated by Gottlob Frege and Ludwig Wittgenstein, that sees language as the transcendental structure of experience. According to this language-centered account, subjects do not understand things without language or some other conceptual system. This idea was later endorsed by conceptualists such as John Searle and John McDowell, who claimed that concepts mediate the world to the mind, or further, that experiences have concepts in them, hence all perceptual experiences have conceptual mental content (McDowell 1994; 1996: 46–65). According to conceptualism, a perception of a thing depends on having its concept.

Given that visual hybrids are images emerging in the visual sphere, aesthetics, which is the science of the visual sphere and its perception, should address and analyze the perception of visual hybrids. On the whole, the conceptualist approach will not suffice to capture the depth and intricacy of the aesthetic perception. True, aesthetics went through a linguistic turn of its own, followed by a conceptualist one, in the second half of the twentieth century, defining art as language whose perception is conceptual (the presenters of this turn are Richard Wollheim, Nelson Goodman, and Arthur Danto). However, the assertion that the perception of artworks, design works, and other aesthetic compositions is not fully captured by the conceptual scheme, and that language is foreign to visual compositions, has been formulated in aesthetics as well, and was claimed by Immanuel Kant, aestheticists, formalists, and by visualists such as Gombrich and Rudolf Arnheim. According to Arnheim, the power of composition is beyond concepts and language. He therefore argues in his 1954 canonical visualist book *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, "It often happens that we see and feel certain qualities in a work of art but cannot express them in words. The reason for our failure is not that we use language, but that we *have not yet succeeded in casting those perceived qualities into suitable categories*" (Arnheim, [1954] 2009: 2; my emphasis).

While Arnheim's visualist proposition was asserted amid a linguistic-conceptualist century, new voices of the visual turn that are similar to

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his are being heard nowadays. An explicit manifestation of it appears in *Vision Fulfilled: The Victory of the Pictorial Turn* (2019). The editors Kristóf Nyíri and András Benedek have been leading the very fruitful international Visual Learning Lab since 2009, which has been one of the main voices of the theoretical realization that, in an age ruled by screens and interfaces, philosophy can no longer attribute superiority to language and concepts over images in culture, cognition, and the characterization of the human being. Therefore, in the chapter "A New Paradigm in Education: The Priority of the Image," Benedek offers a corresponding visual imperative that takes into account the "significant turn" that has been brought about by "the massive spread of touchscreen devices and the practice of personalized use commencing at a very young age among children." Still entrenched in the linguistic paradigm, Benedek claims, schools have not adapted to the reality in which "creating images, supplementing messages with diverse contents, applying specific genres (video, flash multimedia content, and animation) have become an increasingly general practice in everyday communication. Storing, editing, and sharing pictures, distributing them through networked communications systems became a basic social activity in the past decade" (Nyiri and Benedek 2019: 12). The visual turn gradually reveals the visual sphere as a major arena for philosophical analyses of ontology, humans, nature, and culture. Within this framework, the visual hybrid deserves analysis as an aesthetic combination or composition, stripped of blurring layers of the overuse of the term *hybrid* and of language itself.

2. Hybrids and Language

Holding an externalist view, and like the visual turn theorist believing that visuality is a main influential element in our being, I devoted a few projects to what I name *visualism* (Gal 2019, 2020). I want to suggest that one of the crucial dynamics visual hybrids have the power to reveal is the extent to which the presumption that the effects of visual images ought to be viewed primarily from within a conceptual framework obscures the unique visual qualities of such images. Language and conceptuality possess what we might call a *freezing effect* on visual aesthetic compositions and the force of compositions. In a kind of defiance of this freezing effect, the visual hybrid attaches elements ("parents") that originate in different ontological categories and which remain distinctly perceivable within the new composition. Visual hybrids thus resist conceptuality, on the one hand, but, on the other, remain vulnerable to losing their essentially hybrid quality to the presumption that language and conceptuality ought to be seen

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as the default analytical framework. I do not mean to suggest all language is conceptual but rather that language often possesses the power to force conceptuality on visual compositions, and in that regard leads viewers to overlook the fine-grained aspects of composition that, as Arnheim noted, cannot be cast within preexisting conceptual categories. It is within the context of this analytical conundrum that I turn to innovative theory of the "schematology" of visual hybrids laid out by Yeshayahu Shen and David Gil in this special issue as well as in a cluster of experiments to investigate the impact of linguistic taxonomies on the perception and classification of visual hybrids (Mashal et al. 2014; Gil and Shen 2019). Gil and Shen's study proves that the classification and conceptualization of visual hybrids by viewers, or lack thereof, is susceptible to the presence of language, namely, to nonlinguistic or alternatively linguistic contexts of presentation. As will be detailed shortly, Gil and Shen show that in the presence of language, viewers of visual hybrids tend to classify them according to built-in conceptual hierarchies, but that no such conceptual classification occurs when the images are presented on their own. I find their thought-provoking findings informative for philosophy and the study of aesthetic perception, mainly for the discussion about the relationship between the visual and the linguistic, or visual perception and conceptual schemes. What may be concluded from the findings is that by forcing conceptuality on the visual hybrid, language *disrupts the hybridity of the visual hybrid*, turning it into what could be named a *dead hybrid*, to borrow a term from the terminology of metaphor analysis. That is to say, language interferes with the dialectic character of the visual hybrid, being a combination of the uncombined and thus belonging to no category and immune to classification. What is more, given that when presented only visually the hybrids provoked no conceptual classification, we can support the claim that visual nonconceptual perceptual content exists, and add a new proposition that the visual hybrid is included in it.

In one of the experiments conducted by Gil and Shen, visual hybrids are presented alone, and participants were given a forced-choice judgment task to categorize the hybrids, for example, if the hybrid was either a man with wings or a bird with man's legs. In another experiment, the participants were presented with a series of visual hybrids in conjunction with complete visual images of the parental categories of the hybrids (e.g., a bird and a man; fig. 1). In another test they were presented with hybrids and asked to produce verbal descriptions of them. In yet another experiment, hybrids were presented in juxtaposition with grammatically asymmetrical phrases such as *a man with bird's wings* and its opposite, *a bird with man's legs*, which would prove to be essentially different from the symmetrical *half man, half*

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bird" phrase, and were asked to choose which phrase fits the visual hybrid. In a further experiment the participants were presented with grammatically asymmetrical linguistic phrases in order to judge their fit (or lack of it) with subsequent visual hybrids. Thus, Gil and Shen examine asymmetric linguistic units' effect on the visual nongrammatical, nonverbal medium (Gil and Shen 2019: 2). I find the encounter between the asymmetry of linguistic phrases and the visual hybrid to be paradigmatic of the freezing effect that language and conceptuality have on visual compositions. Recognizing this freezing effect should lead us to think anew about the role that analytic aesthetics has afforded language and concepts in the context of the linguistic turn. While language and conceptuality can be seen as intrusive forces on visual media, nonconceptual perception is congruent with the visual. With these tendencies in mind, I mean to make the case that nonconceptual terminology ought to be introduced to the characterization of aesthetic visuality and its perception.

What is equally noteworthy about the results of Gil and Shen's experiments is the fact that a conceptual hierarchy took effect *only* in experiments in which grammatically asymmetrical linguistic units were involved. Conceptual hierarchies—an ordering of interrelated concepts like the movement from humans to animals to plants to inanimate objects—is a basic form of knowledge organization, an organization that cognitivists claim to be built in to human cognition, even heritable. In the case of a horse-human hybrid, for example, the involvement of language in the visual experience causes the viewers of the hybrid to classify it as *a human* with the body of a horse. That is to say, in the presence of language, the participants both classified the hybrid (as human) and did it according to the conceptual hierarchy (as a human with a horse's body, rather than a horse with a human's torso), implicitly embracing the received hierarchy that affords a privileged conceptual status to humans over animals. Gil and Shen (2019: 13) explain these findings as follows: "The hierarchy effect shown previously is *due solely to the verbal medium* and the presence of grammatical structure" (my emphasis). With language around, that is, the visual hybrid invokes conceptual mental content and freezes.

In the experiments in which hybrids were presented by themselves, namely, as images with no verbal context, "subjects were asked to decide which of the two sets the hybrid belonged to." The framing results were around 50 percent, that is to say, "at chance level" as reported by Gil and Shen (12). Contrarily, participants who were asked to produce a verbal description of the hybrids, or to choose one of the two asymmetrical phrases, showed a clear tendency to categorize the hybrids as belonging to the category located higher in the preexisting conceptual hierarchy.

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For example, the participants tended to describe the half-bird half-man hybrid as a man with wings rather than a bird with man's legs. However, "the hybrid stimuli in non-verbal and other contexts devoid of grammar," namely, when the hybrid visual images were purely, only visually, presented, the hybrid was not usually described as a man with wings, but as half and half. In contrast, when language was introduced as an element of the perceptual experience accompanying the visual image, participants categorized the hybrids as belonging to one conceptual category or another. When language is introduced, it subjugates the hybrid to hierarchy forcing us to choose the higher of the two parents and put it in a more grammatically prominent position, for example, as the head of a noun phrase in which the second parent is an attribute, as in *man with the head of a dog*.

As cognitivists, Gil and Shen claim that their "main finding is that the Ontological Hierarchy is in fact relevant to the conceptualization of hybrids." That is, the visual hybrids' leaning is toward categorization "in accordance with the parent that is higher on the Ontological Hierarchy; for example, a man-bird as a kind of man, not as a kind of bird" (11).

However, aestheticians, especially externalist-visualist ones, would find interest in the other part of the findings, which is the reaction of the participants to the hybrids given in a nonverbal context of the presentation. What is informative regarding visual perception is the fact that no tendency of categorization, no conceptual hierarchy-bound classification of the hybrid, appears when the visual hybrid is left by itself undescribed by language. Though Gil and Shen hold a cognitivist view; while I am a visualist, our approach to the idea of the essence of the visual hybrid is in the same vein, because they think that visual hybrids start out as "real hybrids," that is to say, without adjudication. They conclude that "clearly the conceptualization of visual hybrids is dependent on the medium in which it is conducted, with the verbal medium having a significant effect on the categorization of hybrids" (Shen and Gil 2017: 1186). Shen and Gil (2019: 11) add,

> The Ontological-Hierarchy [again, later considered to be "conceptual hierarchy" or "schematological hierarchy"] effect depends crucially on the medium in which the categorization takes place; specifically, it is dependent on the presence of grammar. In the absence of grammar, subjects tend to conceptualize hybrids symmetrically; for example, a manbird is not more manlike than birdlike, and when forced to choose, similar numbers of subjects will choose either option. However, in grammatical contexts they are more likely to verbalize the same hybrids asymmetrically, in accordance with the Ontological Hierarchy; for example. A man-bird might be described as a man with bird's wings rather than a bird with man's legs.

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What we see here is that when language with asymmetrical grammatical structure is involved in the viewer's perceptions and experiences of visual compositions of hybrids, the visual aspects of the hybrid are displaced by the imperative to align the hybrid into the higher category in the hierarchy. I would like to claim further that it takes over the visual medium and forces conceptuality on the hybrid—a conceptuality that negates the hybrid's essence.

To support my claim, it is significant to stress here the disruption of the symmetrical nature of the visual hybrid by language. The visual hybrid is a symmetrical image in the respect that the roles of its components are (more or less) equal (sometimes one of the parts of the hybrid is larger than the other or others, but this is exceptional). However, asymmetric grammatic structures apply asymmetric identification and perception on the visual hybrid. Namely, accompanied by language, rather than identifying a man-horse hybrid as a half man, half horse, the hybrid is identified as a man with horse legs. The conceptual hierarchy enforced by language prevents the hybrid from being hybrid to its fullest, rendering it a dead hybrid.

3. Hybrids, Metaphors, and Categorization

The crucial role played by the symmetrical nature of the visual hybrid, or the coequal nature of the hybrid's elements, becomes particularly apparent if we contrast visual hybrids with visual metaphors. The two "parent" elements of the visual hybrid remain distinguishable from one another. Robert Young describes it well: "It is an antithetical movement of coalescence and antagonism . . . doubleness that both brings together, fuses, but also maintains separation" (Young 1995: 21–22). On the contrary, in the visual metaphor, the source reconstructs the target anew so that a whole new entity emerges whose "former" parts are no longer separable (Gal 2022: x, chap. 4). For example, the mermaid hybrid is combined by a half-female torso and half-fish tail, seen as two attached parts. No properties of each of the parts are applied to the other. Similarly, *Kokon Table-Chair* hybrid attaches its parts with a mixed part in between, but they are well discernible as almost autonomous parts, thus easy to identify (and the same discreteness characterizes hybrids with more than two parents). But where visual hybrids preserve the distinctions between the source elements they bring together, in the case of a visual metaphor like Seletti's *Hamburger Armchair*, a few of the hamburger's properties, such as shape and colors, are applied to the armchair so that the armchair is reconstructed to be a hamburger by itself and classified as such (fig. 8). Consequently, the cushion-soft bun possesses emergent mixed properties that are not possessed by either

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Figure 8 Seletti, Hamburger Armchair. Printed with permission from Seletti S.p.a.

the source or the target of the metaphor. The armchair is introduced to the group of hamburgers, as a *peripheral* member, but still a member. That is to say, the armchair is now conceptually classified as a hamburger. Some sort of ontological symmetry may result therefrom, because parallel to the introduction of the armchair to the group of hamburgers, a hamburger is introduced to the group of armchairs. But this does not affect the kind of amalgamation that characterizes visual metaphors as opposed to visual hybrids. Contrary to visual metaphors, the man-bird visual hybrid is not introduced to any of the groups of men or birds. Where the categorization of visual metaphors is predicated upon the hierarchy implicit in the fact that properties of one element of the image are brought in to reconstruct the other element, the elements of visual hybrids retain their distinctness and autonomy from one another, in the absence of any conceptual or linguistic framing.

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We see then that a presentation of visual hybrids appearing solely by themselves resulted in no inclination to classify them among the participants. They could not, or would not, categorize them, especially would not locate them within the conceptual hierarchy. Is it that the participants did not know what those entities were? Alternatively, did they know, *but in a nonconceptual manner*? To the suggestion above, that the perception of visual hybrids is of the nonconceptual kind, I would like to add now that this fact is significant for the analysis of aesthetic perception in general.

Let us look again at the related compositional phenomenon which is the visual metaphor, which, in contrast with hybrids, does invite classification. Visual metaphors are more ubiquitous in visual art and design than hybrids are. Ernst Gombrich (1969) claims that all visual art's perception is metaphorical and is founded on what he names "Pygmalion Power": the metaphorical-perceptual tendencies and abilities of viewers to project close categories on members of distant ones to render them familiar. Gombrich notes the human tendency to apply facial properties to a great many things, reconstructing them to possess faces. In other words, at the end of the day, metaphorical practice is ontological. Identification of metaphors involves the skill of adding a new member to a group by way of endowing the metamorphosed thing with a new ontological status due to its emergent properties (thus causing an ontological change, rather than a mere conceptualization). One of Gombrich's examples of visual metaphors is artificial cowrie shell eyes fastened to a modeled skull from Jericho in about 6000 BCE. "The difference between symbolization and representation is one of use, of context, of metaphor," Gombrich observes. "In both cases, similarities present a starting point for what I have described somewhat pedantically as the 'extension of a class'. Here the class of eyelike objects can take the place of eyes because when they are put in position the skull will suddenly 'look' at us" (88). The shells do not symbolize or refer to eyes, but are rendered legible as eyes by way of metaphor that invites immediate classification as eyes. Noel Carroll (1994) also addresses both the amalgamation of the metaphorical parts and identification when it comes to metaphors. In Carroll's account "Visual Metaphors" visual metaphors are conditioned upon homospatiality, that is, the existence of elements in the same single bounded, physical entity. These elements, Carroll claims, bring to mind different categories or concepts, which we combine and activate by mapping part of what we associate with one of the categories onto the other category.

Visual metaphors such as Pablo Picasso's *Baboon and Young* from 1951 (fig. 9), are relatively close to visual hybrids since their two components, which originate in different categories only to be combined into one entity, none-

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Figure 9 Pablo Picasso, Baboon and Young, 1951.

Figure 10 Head of a Bull, 1943.

theless, retain their independent identities and remain perceptually distinguishable. That said, Picasso's sculpture is not a hybrid, because the car *is* repurposed to be a head, rather than retaining its own original function. Similarly, Picasso's *Head of a Bull* from 1943 (fig. 10), Claes Oldenburg's *Ghost Drum Set* (fig. 11), and the *Lemon Purse* (fig. 12) are visual metaphors that are distant from hybrids, since their combinations are not made of discrete entities (but rather one entity made by the reconstruction of the target by the source). The structure of the visual metaphor is distinct from that of the hybrid in yet another way, I want to suggest: while visual hybrids consist of two parts, visual metaphors consist of three (Gal 2022). In metaphor the reconstruction of the target by the source of the metaphor creates a third emergent element that, as a result of the synthesis, possesses properties that are distinct from either of their source images. The above-mentioned metaphorical compositions are made of shapes, or prototypical forms, themes, and other aesthetic and chosen properties of the source that reconstruct the *whole target* anew with the emerging properties, unique to these very visual metaphors. For example, "Having leather-made 10 centimeters long lemon wedges" is an emergent property that is possessed neither by the source nor by the target, but only by the lemon purse—the new metaphorical purse. This composition serves as a context for the newly modified emergent properties of the source and target. In addition to the reconstruction of the target, the metaphorical structure changes the source properties according to the context of the metaphorical composition, so they are new subproperties. The baboon's head (the target) is car-like (the source). In this case, it works the other way around as well: the car is head-like. The drums in figure 11 are soft and cushion-like.

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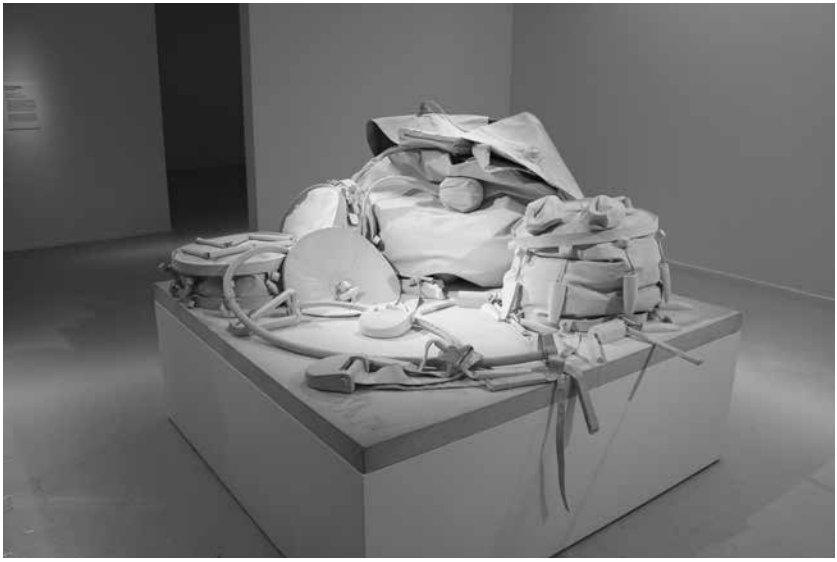

Figure 11 Claes Oldenburg, Ghost Drum Set (1972). Photograph by Rémi de Valenciennes.

Figure 12 Lemon Purse. Photograph by Nira Pereg. Printed with permission from Nira Pereg.

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The crucial point here is that contrary to visual hybrids that resist classification, visual metaphors work with clear classification and categories. The essential structure of metaphor enhances the categories of baboons, lemons, eggs, and drums, as well as the extensions of the predicates, by introducing the targets to the categories of the sources. Again, the purse is a peripheral member of the group of lemons, but it is some sort of a lemon—and when perceived by viewers/users *they immediately classify it as a lemon, with no language needed*. The lemon purse itself invites an enhancement of the category of the lemon to include itself in it. This is decidedly not the case with visual hybrids! As long as language is not involved, the real hybrid, as defined by Shen and Gil (2019), resists categorization or conceptualization. The viewers or users (in the case of hybrid design objects) are inclined to embrace no category above another: the man-bird is a bird no better or worse, no truer or less true, than the bird-man.

So let us accept for the sake of argument the idea that the perception of visual metaphors involves an enlargement of both of the source categories themselves and the perception of those categories. Picasso's bull's head may be said to be on the margins of the category of bull's heads, but it nonetheless remains both an example and an iteration of that category. While visual metaphors may thus challenge categories of recognition, they nonetheless remain within existing categorical frames. Because of the emergent amalgamation of the parts of the visual metaphor, its parts do not stay distinct, belonging to different parental categories. Rather, a singular thing, such as a lemon or hamburger, is constructed and easy to identify and classify. In short, visual metaphors may be conceptualized—at least I would like to assume this possibility for a moment.

Visual hybrids, by contrast, resist categorization. Visual hybrids are structured so that viewers do not combine the original categories or concepts of the components of the hybrid into one, do not map properties of one onto the other, and do not remake the defining elements of either of the constitutive categories. While Seletti's *Hamburger Armchair* is introduced to the group of hamburgers, their hybrid dishes do not introduce one category of style to the other: the table of *Kokon* does not become a chair, nor does the chair become a table. The elements stay distinct, sharing no category, not even an enlarged or open-ended one. The claim is that therefore their perception is of the nonconceptual mental content kind.

4. Aesthetic Perception and Nonconceptual Content

Given that visual hybrids stand as something like a border between the category of art or design works and objects that are external to art, a ques-

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tion emerges: what can the nonconceptual character at the heart of the perception of visual hybrids teach us about aesthetic perception in general? I want to suggest that the essential quality of aesthetic perception of works of art is nonconceptual. Visual hybrids thus ought to be seen as marking the boundary through which images *enter* into the realm of art. Images that generate nonconceptual perception and mental content are the artistic ones; the closer the image is to conceptual perception the less likely it is to be viewed or understood as art. This argument is the focal point of an advanced and ambitious nonconceptualist and visualist project in which I try to prove the superiority of the visual over language, mainly the realm of aesthetic things such as artworks, design products, and visual metaphors or hybrids (Gal 2015, 2019, 2020, 2022). The visual hybrid is fundamental here, revealing the nonconceptual quality of visual art.

Therefore, I suggest the time is overdue that aesthetics implemented the terminology of the nonconceptual theory to analyze the character and power of visual compositions. Sketching the compositional abilities of artworks and their perceptions, we identify a few qualities of perception that are characterized as nonconceptual content by Tim Crane, Christopher Peacocke, Sean Kelly, and others: a) contradictory content, b) the way a thing is presented, c) analog and fine-grained experience, and d) observational perceptions of things with no preconception of them. Crane (1988, 1992) shows that the content of the experience of the Waterfall Illusion, for instance, is contradictory (the perceived object is moving and not moving at the same time), hence, according to him, it is nonconceptual in kind. Peacocke (2001) emphasizes the fact perceptual experience's fine-grainedness is beyond conceptual content. His examples are objects that are perceived as "having a quite specific shape and size and quite specific shades of colors, surface textures, and contours." He himself refers to "the new Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, or see a new abstract sculpture, or the face of a person." Additionally, Peacocke focuses on the "way in which some property or relation is given in the experience" (240), namely, the ways things are presented to the viewer—for example, Mach's cube that is presented once as a square and once as a diamond. Kelly (2001: 602) adds that the main features of nonconceptual perceptual content are "the dependence of a perceived object on the perceptual context in which it is perceived, and the dependence of a perceived property on the object it is perceived to be a property of."

While conceptualists, as Peacocke (2001) defines, claim that the representational content of experience is always conceptual, nonconceptualists claim that there is content that is not captured by concepts, yet is at the same time representational, intentional, and specified. What is important

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here is that the nonconceptualists' terminology is useful, perhaps necessary, for the discussion of aesthetic perception. The features of nonconceptual content made legible by visual hybrids are the very features that characterize artistic compositions and art's compositional abilities to invoke a specific perception of it.

The perception of the visual hybrid brings about a unique kind of nonconceptual content, one that has not been analyzed in the nonconceptual literature yet, though it is a well-established, cross-cultural phenomenon. My collaboration with Shen enabled us to understand that the hybrid is a nonconceptual content as well—a complex content that is composed of preconceptualized (or preconceived) components: "a man" and "a bird." The content of its experience is not contradictory, unlike the Waterfall Illusion. Despite this, it does not create any open-ended category, since unlike the visual metaphor its conceptual components are not divided into source and target. Presented in an innocent visual manner, the man and the bird stay at the same level. The visual hybrid is thus a more extreme visual phenomenon than the visual metaphor. Unlike visual metaphor, irony, or the grotesque, it is not structured to be an asymmetrical reconstruction dependent on a hierarchy of predication or categorization. Moreover, it does not produce a hierarchy. It can therefore be argued that the perception of the hybrid is a distinctive kind of nonconceptual mental content.

Conceptualism took over the field of metaphor in the 1980s, when Lakoff and Johnson, Kövecses, and others defined metaphor as a conceptual mental scheme. According to conceptual metaphor theory, metaphor is the mental understanding of the concept of the target domain through the concept of the source domain. What is more, according to Lakoff and Johnson, visual metaphors are merely external entailments of the internal-mental conceptual scheme. In departing from the conceptual definition of metaphor (which I detail in Gal 2022: chap. 3), I claim that visual metaphors, as well as the visual sphere, are the source of conceptual metaphors, rather than the post-hoc expressions of such metaphors. No doubt that the *Hamburger Armchair* is not an entailment of understanding the concept of *armchair* through the concept of *hamburger*.

Visual hybrids, I suggest, challenge the premises of conceptualism in even more fundamental ways. We do not have a prior conceptual scheme in which the man-horse or chair-table can be absorbed if we wish to preserve them as hybrids. It is only by keeping the images of horse and human merely visual that we can sustain the aesthetic combination of gluing them together as a visual experience. We may give them names, such as "mermaid," and they even become canonical. But naming, in these circumstances, ought to be seen as a kind of refusal to assimilate the hybrid image

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to existing taxonomic categories rather than a submission to those categories. A visual hybrid operates to keep the categories of its components fully alive. If we push both elements to one category, we effectively kill the hybrid much in the way metaphors become dead metaphors. The idea of an ever-reverberating character of visual hybrids finds some support in the following question raised in *Are There Hybrid Visual Cultures?*, a work that examines the relations between cognitive structures and innovative visual decoding:

> Considering, on theoretical and empirical grounds, the existence of hydridic visualities in contexts of cross-cultural interaction. What happens when objects induce the meeting or clash of divergent technologies of the visual? Under what circumstances are objects capable of shaping responses or naturalizing themselves as active agents in foreign contexts? What mechanisms control the generation of novel strategies of visual decoding, and how do these relate to their cognitive and social frameworks? (Papalexandrou 2010: 30)

Visual artworks and various aesthetic compositions possess forms and relations of forms, shades, intervals, expressivity, and so forth. They transgress categories; merge categories of objects, materials, and different types of media; or render categories open-ended. They present objects in novel ways and aspects. Artworks sometimes exhibit contradictions, and in so doing, generate innovative perceptual spheres. Moreover, some artworks combine different categories into one image or entity, leaving them uncombined at the same time, thus creating a contradictory experience or mental content. Even Goodman, the semioticist who made the case for classifying all artworks as necessarily symbolic and referential, admits to the syntactic density of the artistic symbol (Goodman 1978: 67). This density is the fine-grained thickness of the medium and can only be so as long as we refuse existing conceptual taxonomies.

Using the analytical framework of nonconceptual theory and its terminology, we come to see that what renders the bicycle's parts a bull's head (target) in Picasso's visual metaphor is the *ways* in which the saddle and handlebars sources of the metaphor are positioned, as well as their relations. Accordingly, they exemplify the chain of dependence of perception: the effects generated by the saddle and the bars depend on their perceptual context. These are all nonconceptual contents. The particular properties of shape and form that register to those who would perceive them rest on both the objects they are properties of and the context in which they are placed. This ends up with some kind of a bull's head, which can be somewhat classified as such and is allowed into the group of bulls. It is a bull's head and at the same time, it is not. This conflict of perception, as well as

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the aesthetic exaltation that is given to the viewer, cannot be fully conceptualized as long as the metaphor is alive. My very attempt to describe it literally here is actually harmful, since it forces linguistic order on the visual, and freezes the nonconceptual living visual metaphor. But still, the reconstructed target joins a known category, which may be conceptualized. The case of the visual hybrid is more extreme because there is no introduction to category and thereby there is no tendency of category among its viewers. The hybrid is defined as a *combination, more accurately, gluing, of what cannot be combined.* Hybridity thus stays alive as long as language is not involved, as shown by the results of the experiments.

In *Hybridity and its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture*, Nicholas Thomas explains the resistance of hybrids to conceptual schemes by way of the exposition of hybrid artifacts in museum shows, what he terms *post-colonialist curating.* Thomas labels as a-hybrids "essentialized identities, and the exhibition of hybrid objects that refute the essentialist ethnic and cultural typifications" that have come to characterize museums, given that such museums have been sites for the display of essentialized identities. As Thomas tells it, "The culturally 'mixed' nature of these objects does not somehow reflect or express a mixed 'identity' because it reflects no identity. If we describe the artefacts as bearers of a hybrid identity, we may be imprisoning them in a frame that is no less misleading and invidious than that of colonial ethnic typification" (2005: 198–99).

As we have seen, the nonconceptuality of the hybrid can be sustained only so long as language is not involved. Once language is introduced as a framing mechanism of perceptual perception, it effectively endows such perception with at least partial order and conceptualization. Gil and Shen's experiments show though that language is *not* always there, transcendental to the experience. This is significant. Here we join the challenge the nonconceptualists set to the linguistic turn philosophy and its following conceptualism. This challenge leads us to recognize that it is the classification of the hybrid as a visual phenomenon that delineates a visual-perceptual boundary, a genealogy that is instructive for the analysis of aesthetic perception in general. Notwithstanding the visual hybrid's extremity as a form of visual composition, when it is juxtaposed with language, the hybrid succumbs to language's conceptual force. Language interferes with the hybridity of the hybrid, diminishes its unique perceptual effects of alienation and innovation, and freezes the hybrid into conceptuality. I suspect it has the same freezing effect on visual metaphors. Namely, visual, but also verbal, metaphors *freeze*, or *die* (both terms are used in the literature to refer to a metaphor the effect of which has subsided) not only when it becomes conventional, but also when language or conceptual categorization seizes

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it. Anyway, if it is so in an extreme case, it is all the truer in more moderate cases in art, where nonconceptuality emerges from relatively organized compositions, nuances, forms, and relations, and the dependence of objects and their properties on perceptual context and ways of presentation. We ought to question anew the status language is afforded by the aesthetics thought in relation to the visual.

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