



Jean-Paul RIOPELLE, L'hommage à Rosa Luxemburg, 1992 (détail) [ \* ]

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## Does Contemporary Art Have Cognitive Value?

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In his book *Art and Knowledge*, James O. Young suggests that avant-garde art, because it tends to eschew the resources of illustrative representation, lacks cognitive value. Because he regards cognitive value as a necessary condition for a high degree of aesthetic value, he concludes that avant-garde works tend to have little aesthetic value and thus do not deserve to be regarded as valuable artworks (or, in many cases, as artworks at all).

In this paper, I will mount a defence of avant-garde art against Young's criticisms. I will examine particular artworks to show that the use of exemplification in many avant-garde works is sufficient to allow them to make the kind of cognitive contribution Young requires. And I will show that even an avant-garde work that uses virtually none of the resources of illustrative representation makes available an experience that is a valuable source of knowledge. There is, thus, nothing about avant-garde art that prevents it from having, or makes it especially unlikely to have, cognitive value.

A point of clarification is in order. The title of my paper refers to contemporary art, whereas Young speaks of avant-garde art, so it might appear that we are concerned with different subject matters. But Young clearly does intend his critique to apply to much contemporary work, as he claims that "...the avant-garde is currently the dominant academic style" in the visual arts (139). My commitment to the value of contemporary art plays a large role in motivating what follows.

Art has a distinctive way of contributing to knowledge, in Young's view. Artworks, unlike, say, scientific theories, provide us with perspectives on their objects, and these perspectives make new insights available. For example:

Monet's paintings of the cathedral (in Rouen) ... can add something to an audience's conception of the cathedral. Audience members can learn that the appearance of the cathedral varies greatly with time of day and atmospheric conditions, and that its emotional impact on viewers can be enormously various. (81-2)

To have cognitive value, an artwork must not only make new insights available, but also supply us with justification for those insights: after all, knowledge requires justification. An artwork supplies such justification, in Young's view, by putting us in a position to recognize the appropriateness of the perspective it presents.

On this understanding of what constitutes value for artworks, Young tells us, "[s]omething has gone dreadfully wrong in modern art" (134). Specifically, avant-garde artworks, by virtue of their distinctive features, eschew the very resources that make it possible for artworks to contribute to knowledge. The avant-garde style, as Young defines it, comprises all works possessing two features: First, "avant-garde works of art are always new and unlike ... all previously produced artworks, except a small set of roughly contemporaneous avant-garde works" (137). Second, and most importantly, "avant-garde art ... forsakes all or many of the resources of illustrative representation.... [T]he only form of illustration employed by many avant-garde works," Young tells us, "is exemplification" (138).

Why is illustrative representation so crucial? Illustrative representation, by providing us with an experience that resembles in certain ways the experience of the represented object, can present and demonstrate the correctness of a perspective on the represented object. In Young's view, the failure to employ illustrative representation deprives avant-garde works of the capacity to present a perspective on an object, for "art must represent the aspects of the world into which it provides insight" (23). And if avant-garde works cannot present perspectives on objects, they cannot contribute in a significant way to knowledge.

I will not here take up the question of whether we should accept Young's requirement that an artwork, to be worthy of the name, must contribute to knowledge in the way he describes. Instead, I will ask, are avant-garde works in fact incapable of presenting and demonstrating the appropriateness of a perspective on reality, as Young charges? To answer this question, we must first have a clearer idea of what Young's avant-garde category consists of. We can then see how the category may be extended to encompass many contemporary artworks, and assess whether these works, as a class, are somehow precluded from having cognitive value.

Avant-garde works are, by Young's definition, those that do not employ the full resources of illustrative representation. But this is not to say that they employ no such resources. Some of Young's avant-garde artists are abstract painters, including Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. While these artists' mature works do not contain likenesses of real objects that exist in the world, to say they are completely void of representational content or intent would be incorrect. Kandinsky's works appear to present forms in space; as he said at the opening of a 1914 exhibition of his work, "objects did not want to, and were not to, disappear altogether from my pictures.... [O]bjects, in themselves, have a particular spiritual sound...." Rothko's works are readily seen as alluding to emotional and spiritual states (just as abstract musical works may do, in Young's view). And Mondrian and Newman sometimes use titles (*Broadway Boogie Woogie*, *The Stations of the Cross*) to associate their images with concrete subject matters.

Others among the avant-garde artists picked out by Young use illustrative representation quite explicitly. Young discusses René Magritte's painting *La Trahison des images*, in which an illustration of a pipe is juxtaposed with the statement, "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." He also includes in his roster Jeff Koons, who is well known for oversized kitsch figurines such as [\*Michael Jackson and Bubbles\*](#)

and [St. John the Baptist](#), and Claes Oldenburg, whose œuvre includes many everyday objects sculpturally rendered in soft, droopy material (as in [Soft Pay-Telephone](#) and [Floor Burger](#)). The inclusion of Oldenburg is somewhat surprising, since his sculptural works, which toy extensively with solidity, materiality and scale, seem quite rich in possibilities for presenting perspectives on the objects they depict, and on the world in which such objects are everywhere to be found.

A further grouping of Young's avant-garde artists consists of those who employ not (or not only) representation, but the direct "sampling" of imagery, objects, materials or phenomena from non-art contexts. Marcel Duchamp, with his ready-mades, is an obvious example. Andy Warhol was a notorious appropriator of imagery who created plywood boxes screen printed with the same words and patterns as those found on [Brillo](#) soap pad boxes, made a sculpture of actual cans of Campbell's Soup, and produced a series of silkscreens from a newspaper photograph of an [electric chair](#). He also sampled from other artworks, such as Leonardo da Vinci's [Last Supper](#). The composer John Cage samples from reality in *4'33"*, during which the musicians are silent and the audience hears only incidental ambient sounds, and again in *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, in which the performers scan up and down the dials of 12 radios, producing a soundscape dependent on what the local radio stations happen to be playing at the time. We might also see Chris Burden's work [Shoot](#), for which he had a friend shoot him in the arm, as falling into this category insofar as it samples a real-life phenomenon.

This kind of sampling of imagery, materials and phenomena from non-art contexts—which, I take it, centrally involves 'exemplification', one of the resources of illustrative representation identified by Young—remains very common within contemporary art. As I understand him, then, Young includes under the avant-garde heading those works that employ sampling. And if this is true, then a strong case can be made for his claim that the avant-garde remains the dominant academic tendency within contemporary art. Contemporary artists often attempt to eliminate the mediating (or distorting) forces of their own interpretations by simply importing objects, phenomena and materials from the non-art realm, or (when that is not possible or does not serve the artist's purpose) by creating casts of objects, or videos or photographs, as opposed to traditional drawings, sculptures or paintings.

I take it, then, that the following works would count as contemporary examples of the avant-garde tendency:

Damien Hirst's [Mother and Child Divided](#) and [Away from the Flock](#), in which he uses the bodies of animals.

Rachel Whiteread's [House, Untitled \(Torso\)](#) and related works, in which she samples by creating casts of what are referred to in art as negative spaces, such as a building interior and the inside of a water bottle.

Janet Cardiff's [Forty-Part Motet](#), in which the artist presents an installation of 40 speakers, mounted at head-level and arranged in an oval. Cardiff employed 40 microphones, each attached to an individual singer, to record a stunning performance of Thomas Tallis's *Spem in Alium*, a motet for forty voices. The audience member can circulate among the speakers to listen to individual voices and hear the piece from any of a variety of positions. The audience also hears the singers in between performances as they cough, mumble and chat amongst themselves. Cardiff thus makes available to audience members an experience of the piece that would be unavailable even during a live performance, given the social

prohibitions on such behaviours as placing one's ear right next to the singer's mouth.

Now that we have a grasp of the avant-garde category as Young construes it, we are in a position to evaluate his claim that avant-garde works tend to lack value because they fail to contribute to knowledge. To this end, I will present two extended examples of contemporary artworks that employ sampling, or the appropriation of objects and materials from non-art contexts. In each case, as I will show, the use of sampling enables the artist to present a perspective that supplies valuable insights into an important subject matter. Moreover, these works have as great a claim as many valuable non-avant-garde works to success at demonstrating the appropriateness of the perspectives they present.

Annie Thibault, a contemporary artist from Gatineau, Quebec, uses the methods and materials of science to produce her artworks. For her 1999 work *LABORATOIRE: sous l'antre de la chambre stérile* (*LABORATORY: In the shelter of the sterile chamber*), Thibault experimented with fungus cultures, then created an installation in which she attached to the gallery walls a large number of Petri dishes containing the cultures suspended in sterile gelatin. When the work was first

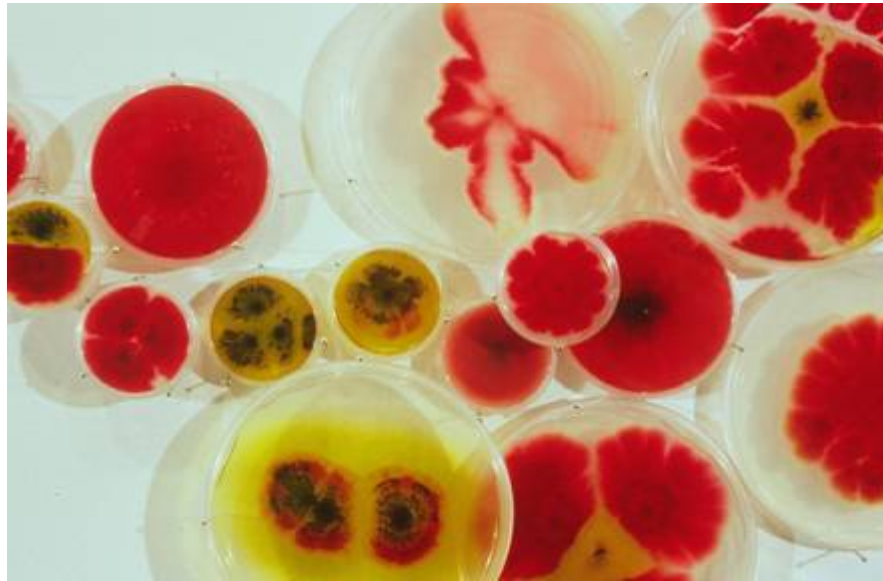


installed, the cultures had not yet begun to multiply; the dishes thus appeared to be empty. A spectacular array of patterns and colours—

mostly reds, but with occasional accents of yellow and orange—developed over time as the exhibition progressed. The pattern in which the Petri dishes were installed was abstract: the work was not simply a drawing using unconventional materials (though the pattern might certainly be seen to allude to certain organic phenomena, such as the spread of roots underground, or a network of blood vessels). The work exemplifies certain natural-cum-scientific phenomena by sampling materials directly from natural and scientific contexts.

There are, unquestionably, some things we learn from seeing Thibault's work. We learn about the development over time of the fungi she works with. In fact, if we stay with the work over time, we can learn a great deal about this subject: the work provides testimony to the multiplication of cells, the gradual infusion of colour, the variability of development under different conditions, and so forth. But Young might well want to suggest that all of these are things better revealed by science. After all, science is well-suited to discovering facts about fungi. And scientists can publish journal articles, textbooks and specialized monographs that are well-suited to conveying these new discoveries to an audience either of specialists or of generalists.

But Thibault is not simply replicating scientific inquiries that have already been performed by others. Her use of materials is quite different from that



of a scientist, and she signals this explicitly by affixing most of the Petri dishes to the wall vertically, rather than displaying them on shelves or tables. The arrangement of the Petri dishes on the walls is unruly rather than regular and organized (in the manner we would expect from a scientific presentation): there certainly is no obvious taxonomic principle of organization. And indeed, the intricacies of the phenomena observed seem unlikely to be fully captured or respected by the overarching principles sought by scientific inquiry. Thibault's work thus presents a perspective on the adequacy of scientific methods for understanding and appreciating such phenomena.

Thibault's work diverges from the methods of science in another respect, as well. Scientists are not in the business of putting on displays, and this in itself suggests that Thibault's project is extra-scientific. But suppose that we compare her work to a similar display that might, conceivably, be found in a science or nature museum, if a set of Petri dishes filled with fungus cultures were exhibited for a period of weeks so that the public could view them and experience, close up, at leisure and in detail, the developments within. The fact that Thibault presents her work in the context of artistic displays, rather than in a museum of science, alters the kind of experience the viewer is likely to have and thus makes possible a very different kind of contribution to knowledge. By presenting the work in a gallery space, she secures a certain kind of attention from an audience whose aesthetic expectations and sensibilities are activated. These expectations and sensibilities involve an openness

to



specifically aesthetic wonderment and delight, a propensity to see the work as situated within an art historical context and as the product of the artist's intentional activity, and a willingness, on this basis, to consider its broader signification—as metaphor, allusion and so forth. By sampling from natural phenomena in an artistic context, Thibault presents a perspective on the natural world, one that reveals the appropriateness of wonderment in response to that world (as opposed to simply provoking such wonderment, as many kinds of non-artistic experience, such as viewing a display in the museum of science, might do). And it does so with an outstanding perceptual richness, imprinting on the senses an awareness of minute details and magnificent patterns that are not adequately conveyed by descriptions or photographs of the same phenomena (or, for that matter, by digital images).



This strikes me as closely parallel to certain claims Young makes in relation to music. “[M]any of Mozart’s musical compositions,” he tells us,

present a perspective on pleasure. In listening to these works one feels something like pure, invigorating delight. As such the music can be an introspective affective illustration of such an affect, and also provides a perspective on it. On this perspective, pure delight is to be thought of as something to be relished. When pleasure is viewed in this way, it is not trivial or something about which one ought to feel guilty. It is somehow essential to being human. (81)

If Mozart can do all of this—not only provoke pleasure, but also, and thereby, convey the appropriateness of that very pleasure—completely in the absence of argument or semantic or pictorial representation, then I am hard pressed to see why Thibault’s work should not be seen as presenting, and demonstrating the appropriateness of, a perspective on the natural world and our experience of it.

Let us now turn to another work, one created by the Canadian artist Liz Magor in 1976. It consists of a bookcase, the shelves of which have been stocked with jars of fruit and vegetable preserves and a box of recipes. To grasp the nature of this work, you might need to know some or all of the following facts. Its title is *Time and Mrs. Tiber*, which suggests that it is somehow about the relationship of a particular person, here identified by name, to time. Mrs. Tiber was a real person who, in fact, made most of the jars of preserves included in the work. The artist, who found the preserves in an abandoned cottage after Mrs. Tiber’s death, made a few more jars of preserves to supplement them. The preserves are gradually disintegrating. In her discussions with curators at the National Gallery of Canada, which owns *Time and Mrs. Tiber*, the artist at one point suggested that it should be allowed to deteriorate, and that when it is no longer exhibitable it should be thrown in the garbage.

Once you know some or all of these facts, certain interpretative possibilities become salient. The work deals in issues related to decay and to our attempts to preserve ourselves and other things against the injurious effects of time. The title suggests a close relation between the objects and Mrs. Tiber, making manifest her attempts to preserve the fruits of her labour and showing the ultimate and necessary failure of these attempts. Her body has already broken down, and her material legacy, though surviving her temporarily, is fading before our eyes. The work is, I think, quite plausibly seen as presenting a perspective on death, and how we live in the face of it. Moreover, the work makes this perspective available in a way that is especially poignant: the objects themselves, which are the products of the labour of the artist and Mrs. Tiber, are visibly disintegrating. Whereas we tend to associate art objects with immortality and make heroic efforts to preserve them, the artist is willing to accept that all evidence of her creative contribution will eventually be swallowed into the void.

Is this work discourse-dependent, a failing that Young identifies in many avant-garde works? Notice that the availability of the perspective presented by the work is in no way dependent on a sophisticated knowledge of art, avant-garde or otherwise. An understanding of the work also requires much less, in the way of background knowledge, than is required by many works of, say, Renaissance art: it does not presuppose knowledge of certain literary narratives, historical figures or events, or reigning discourses of Western culture. And there is nothing particularly obscure about the facts that help us understand the work: a simple wall panel could provide all of the information I've offered, and more. (And viewers might be able to get quite far, interpretatively, with just the title and careful observation, which would allow them to detect the disintegrated state of the preserves.) Because audiences are, in Young's words, "able to acquire the knowledge ... necessary for the interpretation of [the] work" (129), there is no inherent barrier to its interpretability.

I take these cases to show that exemplification provides much richer possibilities, in terms of the presentation of perspectives, than Young acknowledges in his discussion of avant-garde art. The fact that a work exemplifies, say, decay, rather than illustrating it by means of a sign that is conventionally associated with decay, is no barrier to the work's ability to present a perspective on decay and also on death, which the idea of decay calls readily to mind. Indeed, the use of exemplification seems, potentially, to eliminate the need for the sort of pre-existing conventions of representation that make possible the presentation of perspectives by non-avant-garde artworks. And if this is true—if it is true that the use of sampling can in some cases direct an audience to a subject matter even in the absence of established conventions of representation—this seems likely to facilitate, or perhaps constitute, new modes of expression, which Young values highly. Indeed, he tells us, "When artists develop new modes of expression they make possible the thinking of new thoughts" (133).

It is conceivable that Young would concede that the works I have discussed do have cognitive value, but would suggest that the extensive sampling the works employ actually places them outside his 'avant-garde' category. If this is true, then it seems that many of the works he cites as specific instances of the avant-garde would have to be removed from the category. Another consequence would be that his claim about the avant-garde being the dominant academic tendency in contemporary art would come out false: for there are relatively few contemporary works that deal solely in, say, geometric minimalism or pure abstraction or semantic representation.

But suppose we were to restrict the avant-garde category to abstract and minimalist works. Would it be true, even then, that such works fail to contribute to knowledge? Consider a work that is surely an example of the avant-garde par excellence. Fred Sandback's *Untitled (one of four diagonals)* (1970) is a length of black elastic cord that extends from the intersection of two walls and the floor, in one corner of the gallery space, to the intersection of the other two walls and the ceiling, in the opposite corner. The cord is narrow and taut, so what the viewer sees is a sharp, straight, black line running the full diagonal extent of the room.

This work does not employ sampling, as many contemporary works do. It is extremely sparing in its use of illustrative representation. In a 1974 review in *Artforum*, the eminent critic Lawrence Alloway derided a group of similar Sandback works for their "lack of a sufficiently intricate stimulus" ("Reviews," *Artforum*, May 1974). Now I do not mean to defend Sandback as the unrecognized true master of the modernist movement. But I do think that Alloway's response fails to take account of the way in which Sandback's work makes available a certain kind of experience. The very fact that viewers enter the gallery in search of an intricate stimulus, and fail to find it in the object Sandback presents, prompts a redirection of special perceptual attunement toward the context which houses both the work and the viewer. If I give in to the experience of the piece, I can detect responses within myself. I find that, although the string occupies only a tiny fraction of the space in the room and I could easily walk under it without risk of touching it, I feel forbidden to enter. *Untitled* claims the entire room and stakes out a psychological claim on the viewer or, at least, on me, driving my behaviour through a changed perception of the space. If I attend to the black cord's effect on me, I make a new discovery about myself in a certain type of relation to space and objects. I might also find that, faced with an object that is small enough to fit in my pocket and that can, nonetheless, decisively occupy an entire room, my body feels both cumbersome and insubstantial. And as my awareness of my own physicality is interwoven with my awareness of the work, a black cord completely lacking in illustrational significance begins to evoke a precarious tightrope passage, exhibiting the "theatrical" quality that the critic Michael Fried detected in minimalist works ("Art and Objecthood," *Artforum*, June 1967).

Now does this work present, and demonstrate the appropriateness of, a perspective on something that will eventuate in a particular set of identifiable insights that are likely to be shared by all, or most, viewers? I assume that Young would claim that it does not, and I am willing to accept this suggestion (though, of course, if we are interested in facts about audience response, empirical investigation is required). Young is concerned that avant-garde works fail to contribute to knowledge because different viewers report very different experiences of them, with the consequence that the works are uninterpretable. But I don't think we should accept the requirement that audience response be homogeneous.

In his discussion of what makes for cognitive value, Young notes that artworks are especially well suited to providing knowledge of certain subjects: in particular, "ourselves, our emotions, our relations to each other and our place in the world" (97). An artwork which makes available to us a certain kind of encounter places us in a position to gain precisely this kind of knowledge: knowledge about ourselves, our emotions (and our inner lives more generally), our places in the world, our relation to other entities in the world, and so forth. It is hardly surprising that you and I may have different experiences within such a scenario: for we are different people, and it is fully appropriate that I may learn different things about myself than you learn about yourself. One thing I may learn is simply that a certain kind of



experience is possible for me, or that I am the kind of person who has a certain type of experience within a certain situation. And this seems to find a ready parallel in Young's suggestion that an artwork may contribute to knowledge "simply [by] present[ing] the perspective that some emotion is possible" (81)

Sandback's work certainly does not deal in universals about human experience. It does not convey a body of justified insights that every adequately prepared viewer will apprehend. But then, as Young acknowledges, artworks are not suited to demonstrating universal truths in any case. The arts, he says, "will be most able to provide insight into complex, diverse subjects where general laws are elusive or non-existent" (97). For "[a]n artwork ... frequently provides a perspective on only a single object. At most, it presents a perspective on a very specific type of object.... Each sonnet, each sonata, each drawing sheds light on a small corner of reality" (97). And this leads to the conclusion that "[w]hile a few scientific theories will suffice, we need a great deal of art" (97).

There are many things to learn about the world and about ourselves, and the methods sufficient to our explorations will surely be quite variegated. Contemporary art, while it often shies away from illustration, makes extensive use of tools such as appropriation and contextualization that allow it to probe deeply into a wide variety of topics, including those most central to our understanding of the human condition. There is no reason to think that avant-garde artworks are handicapped with respect to their ability to contribute to knowledge. If we wish to undertake a fully nuanced investigation of the important subject matters Young has identified, we need not only illustrative representation, but also works that employ the alternative, but no less fertile, resources of avant-garde art.

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