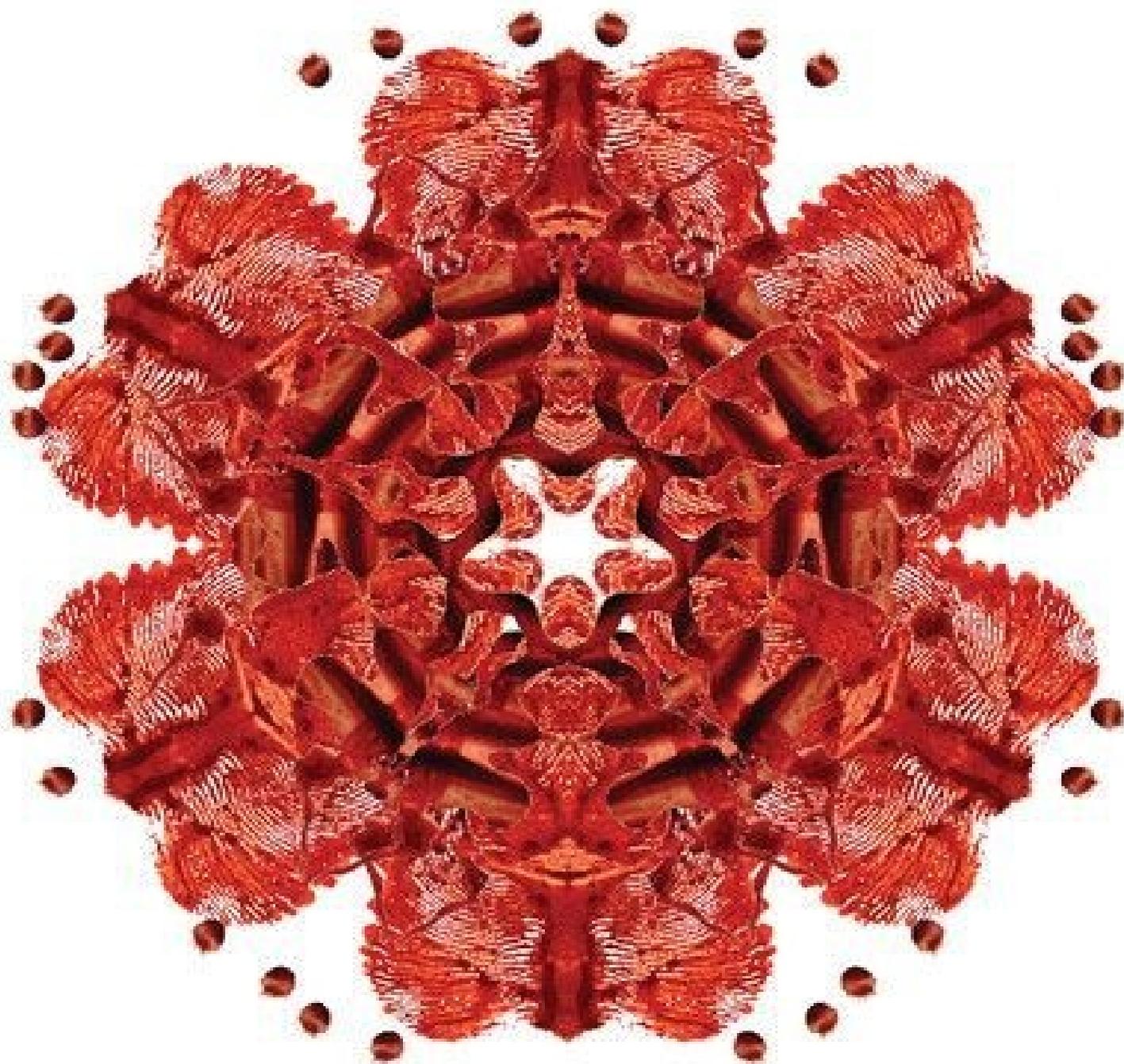


The Psychology of
Contemporary Art



Gregory Minissale

CAMBRIDGE

The Psychology of Contemporary Art

While recent studies in neuroscience and psychology have shed light on our sensory and perceptual experiences of art, they have yet to explain how contemporary art downplays perceptual responses and, instead, encourages conceptual thought. *The Psychology of Contemporary Art* brings together the most important developments in recent scientific research on visual perception and cognition and applies the results of empirical experiments to analyses of contemporary artworks not normally addressed by psychological studies. The author explains, in simple terms, how neuroaesthetics, embodiment, metaphor, conceptual blending, situated cognition and extended mind offer fresh perspectives on specific contemporary artworks – including those of Marina Abramović, Francis Alÿs, Martin Creed, Tracy Emin, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Marcus Harvey, Mona Hatoum, Thomas Hirschorn, Gabriel Orozco, Marc Quinn and Cindy Sherman. This book will appeal to psychologists, cognitive scientists, artists and art historians, as well as those interested in a deeper understanding of contemporary art.

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For my mother, Pat Bird, kind above all others

Contents

List of figures

Preface

Acknowledgements

Eight major trends in contemporary art

Part I Introduction

- 1.1 Processes of perception
- 1.2 Concepts
- 1.3 The cooperation of perceptions with concepts
- 1.4 Scene and object recognition
- 1.5 Object recognition
- 1.6 Granularity in scene recognition
- 1.7 Object categorisation
- 1.8 Schemata
- 1.9 Perceptual symbol systems and art
- 1.10 ‘Illogical’ hybrid objects
- 1.11 Facial recognition
- 1.12 Expert objects

Part II Brain

- 2.1 Neuroaesthetics
- 2.2 Emotions in art: seeing is believing?
- 2.3 Dynamic interconnectivity
- 2.4 Convergence zones
- 2.5 Word and image in contemporary art
- 2.6 Models of aesthetic cognition
- 2.7 Relational knowledge
- 2.8 Analogical processes in relational knowledge
- 2.9 Carl Andre’s *Lever*, 1966
- 2.10 Metaphor and art
- 2.11 The structures of metaphor in art

Part III Body

- 3.1 Embodied approaches to art
- 3.2 Phenomenological approaches in art history
- 3.3 Action as perception
- 3.4 Contra-normative embodiment
- 3.5 Disguised bodies
- 3.6 Queer objects and invisible bodies
- 3.7 Contemporary art and the self
- 3.8 The self and neuropsychology

3.9 Losing oneself: mind wandering

Part IV World

4.1 Does contemporary art situate cognition?

4.2 Evaluating situated cognition

4.3 Clark's extended mind

4.4 Conceptual blending

4.5 Blending time

4.6 'Invisible' blends

4.7 Extending relational knowledge

4.8 The archive as relational knowledge

4.9 Performing relational knowledge

4.10 From relational aesthetics to relational knowledge

References

Index

Figures

- 1 Mona Hatoum, *Keffiyeh*, 1993–1999
- 2 Meret Oppenheim, *Object (Le déjeuner en fourrure – Luncheon in Fur)*, 1936
- 3 Jenny Saville, *Plan*, 1993
- 4 Diagram of the human brain
- 5 Various factors involved in understanding artworks
- 6 Categorisation: superordinate/subordinate/basic objects
- 7 Man Ray, *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*, 1920
- 8 Thomas Hirschorn, *Crystal of Resistance*, 2010
- 9 Gabriel Orozco, *Four Bicycles (There is Always One Direction)*, 1984
- 10 Francis Upritchard, *Bald Monkey Bottle*, 2011
- 11 Brian Jungen, *Golf Bags*, 2007
- 12 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 1981
- 13 Rogier van der Weyden, *Descent from the Cross*, c.1435
- 14 Marcus Harvey, *Myra*, 1995
- 15 Reconstruction of Joseph Kosuth's *Art as Idea as Idea (Art)*, 1967
- 16 Bruce Nauman, *Having Fun/Good Life, Symptoms*, 1985
- 17 Norma Jeane, *#Jan25 (#Sidibouzis, #Feb12, #Feb14, #Feb17. . .)*, Venice Biennale, 2011
- 18 Kate Newby, *You Make Loving Fun*, 2009
- 19 Mona Hatoum, *Hanging Garden*, 2008
- 20 Mimi Parent, *Maîtresse (Mistress)*, 1996
- 21 Meret Oppenheim, *Ma gouvernante – My Nurse – Mein Kindermädchen*, 1936–1937
- 22 Anthony Caro, *Early One Morning*, 1962
- 23 Drawing of Richard Serra, *Running Arcs (For John Cage)*, 1992
- 24 Joana Vasconcelos, *A Novia (The Bride)*, 2001–2005, with detail
- 25 Zanele Muholi, *Case 200/07/2007, MURDER*, from the series *Isilumo siyaluma*, 2007
- 26 Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, 1998
- 27 Yasumasa Morimura, *To My Little Sister/For Cindy Sherman*, 1998
- 28 Schematic illustration of cortical midline structures
- 29 The mechanism of mind wandering
- 30 Extended cognition: the database metaphor
- 31 Fauconnier and Turner's conceptual blend
- 32 Conceptual blend involving geometry mapped onto clock time
- 33 Felix Gonzales-Torres, *'Untitled' (Perfect Lovers)*, 1991
- 34 Conceptual blend involving ordinary clocks mapped onto Gonzales-Torres' conceptual artwork
- 35 Marcel Duchamp, *L. H. O. O. Q., Mona Lisa with Moustache*, 1930
- 36 Marcel Duchamp, *L. H. O. O. Q., Shaved*, 1965

- 37 Conceptual blend involving a memory of *L. H. O. O. Q.* while looking at *L. H. O. O. Q. Shaved*
- 38 Marcel Duchamp, *The Large Glass*, 1967
- 39 Conceptual blend involved in understanding *The Large Glass*
- 40 Marcel Duchamp, *La Boîte-en-valise*, 1935–1941
- 41 Marcel Duchamp, *50 cc Air de Paris*, 1919/1964
- 42 Marcel Duchamp, *Traveler’s Folding Item*, 1916/1964
- 43 Marcel Duchamp, *Bottle Rack* (replica of 1914 original), 1961
- 44 How objects in *La Boîte-en-valise* help to constrain, and are constrained by, four kinds of processes
- 45 Annie Cattrell, *Capacity*, 2008
- 46 Dane Mitchell, *Spoken Heredity Talisman (Robert Johnstone)*, 2011
- 47 Susan Hiller, *From the Freud Museum*, 1991–1997
- 48 Relational knowledge sustained by different psychogeographic works of art

Preface

Contemporary art can be absorbing, challenging and sometimes infuriating. *The Psychology of Contemporary Art* examines the cognitive psychology of these responses and shows how artworks trigger them. The approach taken here brings together domains of knowledge that rarely meet: cognitive psychology and contemporary art history and theory. It steers through polar extremes in psychology: on the one hand, strong embodiment theories that imply that all knowledge is derived from sensory perceptions and, on the other, the cognitive psychology of abstract concepts implying the ‘disembodied’ logic of cognition. It aims to do this by showing how contemporary artworks provide situations where emotions, sensory perceptions and concepts combine in unique ways to structure meaning.

The Psychology of Contemporary Art looks at a broad range of contemporary artworks in order to show how meaning creation involves a dynamic complexity of different thoughts and feelings. This, in effect, means relying on a variety of explanatory models and theories about cognition, embodiment and situatedness, sometimes integrating or moderating these, not because the synthesis of approaches is in itself an aim but because this pragmatic and open approach seems best suited to account for the power of contemporary artworks to absorb us in many variable ways. The book shows how this absorption is arranged by ad hoc combinations of concepts, accompanied by sensory and emotional processes – an improvisation that an artwork’s complex system of signs helps to sustain.

Artists, art historians and lovers of art might ask why they should be concerned with psychology. The short answer is that psychology has developed sophisticated approaches to understanding how we group concepts together in order to create different kinds of relational knowledge. However, these approaches have not yet been applied to the study of contemporary art. A contemporary artist will bring together a body of work over a period of time, or a group of works in an exhibition. Many of these works will reference other artists’ works. We also often read books that bring together collections of artworks. While we regard an artwork as a stand-alone object with unique features, these features can point to this web of artworks creating a system of relational knowledge that elaborates perceptions, concepts, emotions and memories quickly and automatically. Equipped with the systematicity of psychological approaches, this book analyses relational knowledge of this kind and makes its sensory and conceptual structures explicit, providing fresh perspectives on how art encourages creative thought, problem solving and metacognition.

The intricate and rapidly deployed association of concepts involved in creative

thought and problem solving exercises the imagination both for artists producing works of art and for viewers interpreting them. While it is true that, as individuals, we can create very different concepts about the same works of art, to do so we must recall concepts we are already familiar with, take the time to explore them, and sometimes reorder them and adjust them in the light of new experience. If we stop to think about it, we are being creative in these situations, and art often encourages this. If only we knew how to become more aware of our concepts and how we combine them, we might be able to appreciate exactly how creative we are when we experience art; we might also use this creativity at will for many other situations in life. This creativity in viewing demonstrates that we are never just passive consumers of images.

From the point of view of psychology, this book provides an evaluation of well-known models of conceptual integration used to explain how relational knowledge is built up, and suggests that such knowledge is supported by the cooperation of a wide range of resources distributed across the brain and body as well as situations in the world. A work of art is a situation that applies various constraints on the emergence of thoughts, actions, feelings and sensations; it can also encourage us to reflect on these constraints. The psychology involved in the production and reception of contemporary art represents an important opportunity to understand how we construct new knowledge about ourselves and the world we live in today.

There are many examples in art where we ‘see’ concepts intended by the artist even though they are not, in fact, visible. These concepts are pieced together by the viewer from various perceptual cues in the artwork. Whether it is the interlocking colours and forms of the Sistine Chapel ceiling that suggest an intricate dance through history, the harsh lighting and broken glass of Picasso’s *Guernica* assaulting beauty, or Damien Hirst’s disquieting cows in formaldehyde that transform art’s aesthetic tryst with death into a laboratory, slaughterhouse or freak show, works of art may arouse our wonder or ire. They can also command our rapt attention and commitment. This kind of engagement is sustained by a rapidly multiplying network of concepts, the intricate emergence of which goes largely unnoticed by us as we lose ourselves in the intensity of the moment. Somewhat surprisingly, the elaborate substructure of concepts involved in the simulations that artworks provide remains largely unmapped by science and art.

Art history and aesthetics have helped us understand our emotional attachment to the textures, colours, stories and myths of art and the characters they depict, and they have sensitised us to the social and political settings these artworks appear to reflect. These disciplines have also shown us how we form ethical responses to art. Meanwhile, neuroscience and the psychology of art have shed some light on how our brains process the colour, form, rhythm and tactile qualities of art, and they have explained the role of evolutionary processes in our responses to faces, gestures and bodies. These scientific investigations have elucidated many other sensory and perceptual responses involved in viewing art, yet they have not shown us how the

process of becoming absorbed by art is premised on the creative and dynamic integration of concepts in complex networks.

This book is not about measuring the beauty of art by examining and comparing its colours and forms and our responses to them, or about defining the variety of its functions or laws, as is the case with more traditional art history, aesthetics and science. At no point does this book suggest that individuals in different periods and cultures interpret art in the same way. However, it does attempt to explain how our responses to art can be variable and psychologically complex. This book looks at the number of ways in which we connect memories, sensations, concepts and emotions – connections that are often inspired by the perceptual cues of the artwork. This complexity of response can be relatively orderly and measured, or passionate and even chaotic. Sometimes we take a particular kind of pleasure from producing concepts and relations between concepts, which may bring to rest our effort after meaning. Alternatively, we might enjoy concepts that inflame us or move and enthrall us in a struggle for meaning that we do not seem to win. Other works leave us cold or annoyed either through a lack of familiarity or an over-familiarity with their themes. While recent studies in neuroscience and psychology have shed light on our sensory and perceptual responses to art, they have not shown how our engagement with an artwork, both in contextualising it within our broader knowledge of art and in the novel thoughts and feelings that can arise from this encounter, draws upon our abilities to creatively integrate concepts and to upload them into larger wholes.

Because neuroscientific approaches are intent at looking at the formal and perceptible qualities found in traditional and modernist art, from Michelangelo to Mondrian, contemporary artworks that emphasise references to a conceptually rich prior knowledge rather than the immediate rewards of perceptual exploration are often overlooked.¹ Such art has frequently been misunderstood as the acquired taste of an educated elite. Even if largely neglected by science, such art presents an important opportunity for us to understand the nature of our conceptual thought as it engages with many different kinds of art. Cognitive science and psychology need to be informed by trends in contemporary art that provide an emphasis on conceptual production rather than the formalism of traditional aesthetics that serves as the basis for most empirical studies. Artworks in all periods, cultures and forms reference prior knowledge. An artwork is able to facilitate the interplay of emotional chords with various knowledge structures, often causing us to replay the artwork with judgements about how well they are able to do this. There are a great many reasons why people become fully engaged by artworks and this book examines some of the psychological mechanisms that typically support different kinds of absorption in art. Such an experience of absorption will undoubtedly depend on integrating some or all of the following: conceptual blending, long-term memory and relational knowledge, rational induction, analogical reasoning, proprioceptive and embodied experience, and emotional and sensory integration. This book focuses on how particular contemporary artworks situate and constrain these different kinds of integration.

While this book helps to map the manner in which concepts emerge in our encounters with contemporary art, I will also show how this analysis allows us to look again at some key examples of art from different periods, demonstrating the wide applicability of this approach. Although conceptual networks underlie the experience of all kinds of art, it is contemporary art, particularly conceptual art, which treats conceptual production and categorisation as explicit themes.

Conceptual art is a loosely historical term referring to the works of artists, musicians, filmmakers and writers in the 1960s and 1970s, often directly or indirectly referencing Duchamp's work. Themes identified with conceptual art may be found before and after this period, running through Dada, Pop and Neo-Dada to contemporary art. At the risk of simplification, it brings together non-art objects ('readymades') that appear to have no author, purpose or artistic process behind them. Conceptual themes challenge traditional notions of beauty and formal design, artistic dexterity, aesthetic composition, and technique and authorship – the qualities that neuroaesthetics and psychology examine in detail in order to understand the brain and its interactions with art.

One might object that many of these examples are 'anti-art' even though they continue to be celebrated as art in the history books and galleries, and are considered as such by artists and philosophers.² It has been argued that conceptual and contemporary art stimulates us, that it has cognitive or metacognitive value: it allows us to reflect on our cogitations (Carroll, 2006; Gaut, 2006); some find such art to be thought provoking, entertaining or puzzling, and still others find the stripping down of perceptible qualities in conceptual artworks witty, challenging or perverse. It has been ventured that the aesthetic content of such art can be compared to the elegance of a mathematical proof (Goldie and Schellekens, 2010, p. 102). It is also possible that art of this type presents us with 'thought experiments': counterfactuals that rely on imaginative simulations that add cognitive as well as aesthetic value to our lives (Currie, 2006; Gaut, 2006). Yet others, such as Larmarque (2006), question whether cognitive value (when construed as a truth-value) is an essential feature of art. It is not the case that contemporary art *must* have cognitive value or reveal the truth for it to be art. It is true, however, that contemporary art often does provide cognitive value, and I am interested in exploring how this cognition is structured psychologically and how we read the signs to arrive at these judgements. It is possible to argue that this structuring creates artistic, pleasurable, beautiful or cognitive values but it is not the primary purpose of this book to argue that these processes help us to distinguish art from non-art.

It is hoped that a consideration of contemporary art, instead of the traditional art forms usually studied by science, will encourage neuroaesthetics and psychology to take into account large-scale neural events such as conceptual integration and relational knowledge that cooperate with perceptions in visual experience. By providing this wider cognitive context, which contemporary art clearly demands, we

stand a much better chance of understanding our varied and subtle experiences of art. Keeping this wider context in mind, this book offers multiple levels of explanation, incorporating studies of perceptual processes in art foregrounded by the sciences, which suggest a partial view of aesthetic experience, and balances this with research into concrete and abstract concepts constrained by the ‘external marks’ of art. Such an integrated and pluralistic approach promises to give us insights into how neurological events, embodied action and social and cultural situations cooperate in producing different kinds of conceptual content.



Figure 1. Mona Hatoum, *Keffiyeh*, 1993–1999 (human hair on cotton fabric, 120 × 120 cm). Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Agostino Osio. Courtesy of Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice.

In this book, I will interpret artworks using the following four approaches:

- A Formal and technical approaches: the analysis of composition including details of facture
- B Psychological and phenomenological approaches: how we come to understand an artwork’s import
- C Social context, along with biographical, political and cultural specificities that surround the artwork or can otherwise be associated with it
- D Relational knowledge: how an artwork references other artworks and art historical traditions and theories

These approaches can overlap.³ For example, the following description of an

artwork uses the four approaches listed. Mona Hatoum's *Keffiyeh*, 1993–1999, is a white cloth embroidered with human hair in the pattern associated with the Palestinian struggle and dealing with her own diaspora identity. It appears delicate and fragile. The fact that it is human hair creates an affect, as does its soft, tactile quality. The laborious sewing technique requires patience and determination, the hair has to grow to be sewn in. We construct anthropomorphisms (this analysis draws upon approaches A, B and C). The work activates a series of related concepts (scripts or schemata) to do with cloth or wearing cloth. It is also a strange kind of pun that the *keffiyeh* is a male headdress; Hatoum's version suggests a wig to be worn on the head. In thinking about the idea of woven cloth, we imagine some of the sensorimotor actions needed to weave it. There is also a set of ideas associated with hair: strength, beauty, sacrifice, washing feet with hair, Samson and Delilah, knotted hair, tearing out hair, producing feelings of anxiety (B, D). This work, and many other works by the artist, uses the grid form. This reminds us of the modernist grid popular in the art of the 1960s, which was often used to question the artwork as a personal gesture by substituting dehumanising, repetitive work, also emptying the work of content in the pursuit of the high modernist ideals of formalism. The work is thus ironic as it balances formalist concerns with affect and political content, here also linked to women's work: sewing and quilt making that became symbols of feminist art in the 1970s and 1980s. The latter move was meant as a foil to the 'masculine' gaze of high art, where women's bodies are seen as objects from which to derive pleasure (A, C, D); in Hatoum's work, a woman's body is signified by the use of her hair in the artwork and as a vehicle for political protest. Many of these concepts and approaches are integrated in the artist's statement about this work: 'I imagined women pulling their hair out in anger and controlling that anger through the patient act of transcribing those same strands of hair into an everyday item of clothing that has become a potent symbol of the Palestinian resistance movement. The act of embroidering can be seen in this case as another language, a kind of quiet protest.'⁴

It must be noted that all of these approaches and the way they overlap may be analysed from cognitive psychological perspectives, especially if part of this analysis includes social and emotional psychology as well as aspects of situated cognition. This book is informed by these four different approaches and explains how we often apply them tacitly in our encounters with art.

Recent studies in psychology on 'situated cognition', the study of how social and cultural contexts affect psychology, either have largely neglected the context of art or have little detail to offer us as to how, exactly, we integrate concepts in conjunction with the perceptual experience of the artwork. This is an important mapping process to which I will turn my attention in later pages. Studies of situated cognition employ mainly social and lexical examples that contextualise psychological events.⁵

The pluralistic approach of this book represents an attempt to drive a course through two warring factions. On the one hand are those sympathetic to aesthetic empiricism

(Kieran, 2004), which emphasises the perceptible details of artworks (intrinsic properties of the artwork) that are conceived of as its contents (accessed largely through ‘direct perception’). On the other hand is the contextualist approach (Danto, 1964; Dickie, 1984/1997), much favoured by conceptual and contemporary art, which emphasises knowledge strictly extrinsic to the artwork, allowing such perceptible features to be seen as clues to other nonpresent artworks or to aspects of cultural tradition. These factors can influence how direct perception unfolds and, indeed, what is actually perceived. The aim here is to show how a synthesis of art historical and psychological approaches can reveal the important role context plays in the processing of the perceptible details of contemporary art, and also how perceptual details of the artwork activate conceptual relations and categories. Importantly, such a hybrid strategy can also show how these details guide, constrain and help to order contextual knowledge assembled for particular encounters with artworks.

This is not to say that it is not important to enjoy the sensuous details of art, but it is clearly not the case that an artwork’s perceptible details always have to be treated thematically *qua* perceptible qualities rather than as aids in thinking about other things. In fact, with many contemporary artworks, as we shall see, we are encouraged to switch from thematic perceptual processing to perceptual processing as a function of a larger conceptual task; either use of perceptible properties may be pleasurable and co-present. The ability to balance sensations with complex conceptual systems possibly may turn out to be an important way to ascertain the aesthetic status of an artwork, but this is an argument best left for the philosophy of art.

Normally, we are not even conscious of how we process line and colour and, indeed, most people are not aware of this processing unless the work of art is abstract, where lines and colours are all that seem to fill the visual field. Interestingly, while we naturally suppress knowledge of our processes of shape recognition and colour identification, especially while we attend to other aspects of a work of art, for example when trying to interpret the story it might convey, we also tend to ignore the unfolding story of our conceptual production. Contemporary art consistently encourages us to combine concepts not normally brought together in everyday life, as we have seen with Hatoum’s *Keffiyeh*. As thought experiments or counterfactuals, contemporary artworks give us the time to reflect on these unusual encounters rather than relegating them to the realm of idle or random thought rarely held in the memory. We often credit the artwork for making these new conceptual combinations, although we are the agents that actually experience the connections, but this transference from our interpretative faculties to the artwork raises its value in our eyes.

This book attempts to provide ways of raising awareness of the underlying psychology of our often tacitly exercised system of values and relational knowledge, which is definitive of the art experience for many artists and viewers, but which may otherwise remain implicit. I try to do this, firstly, by evaluating various models of conceptual combination in cognitive psychology and, secondly, by examining in depth

processes of conceptual and perceptual integration guided by the coded details of contemporary artworks that we can learn to read. The aim is to show how the perceptual cues found in art provide lines of flight, a joining of the dotted lines suggesting how seemingly incongruous concepts might come together. This focus can also help us, consciously, to report on this process.

We remember the general opinions we have of certain kinds of art, but often we fail to consider how we come to acquire them. We remain ignorant of how different combinations of concepts, different routes on the conceptual map, lead us to seeing works of art from a rich variety of perspectives. While this is how art historians should, and most often do, proceed, this process tends to be automatic. This book aims to make explicit the conceptual production involved in thinking about art. What makes the large and densely patterned edifice of conceptual thought invisible to us and to art history is the fact that it is often constituted not so much from visible, perceptible ‘things’ depicted in works of art but from the relations between them. We can easily understand this if, for example, we take a painting that depicts furniture in a room, objects on a table, or a collection of books on the shelf. These objects may come together to describe an individual’s personality, her interests, or her social standing, and even though she is not visible, we can build up a picture of her identity, or an event (she sat here, she read a book, she ate her food, she left). Such a picture is structured as a system of relations of perceptual cues.

The relations between objects (either lexical or visual) need not be based on a network of single, discrete objects. Sometimes in art, even in one work, we map a series of relations premised on several collections of things, each collection containing a number of smaller objects. In other words, if we go back to the example of a painting, it is possible to build up a picture of several identities or events from the relations of *groups* of things rather than simple objects; the Sistine Chapel and its marshalling together of bodies and forces in groups and areas again springs to mind. In many kinds of art, this is not only commonplace but also definitive of the richness of the experience of being deeply engaged in a work of art, an experience that has a large part to play in our feelings about how art is powerful or transformative. Yet the density of the visual field is not necessary for the complexity of a conceptual network attending it. The apparent simplicity of a Brancusi sculpture of a soaring bird, the fluent lines of a Japanese watercolour of a mountain pass, or the lightly carved handle of a Mughal jade cup in the form of a sinuous, leafy stem can trigger cascades of concepts that seem to vibrate and flow along the lines suggested by the works themselves, trailing off beyond them.

¹ This is so even in the work of Cupchik et al. (2009) and Leder et al. (2004, 2006), whose work on contemporary art, mainly painting, is framed by notions of traditional aesthetics, style and the appearance of artworks rather than specific processes of conceptual combinations involved in art interpretation, which I attempt here. There

has been some treatment of Duchamp's L. H. O. O. Q. by Solso (2003) in terms of how we form a cognitive set to be able to read art, which Solso calls schemata. This excellent introduction to art, however, mainly deals with perception, not conceptual production. Among a plethora of examples from pre-twentieth century art, Stafford (2007) occasionally turns to some contemporary artworks while ignoring many important themes of such art, particularly the anti-formalism of conceptualism, readymades and other aspects of Duchamp's legacy. The cognitive psychology of conceptual production, which is well placed to address many of these themes, is also ignored.

² See various scholars supporting this view in Goldie and Schellekens (2007).

³ It might also be said that phenomenology, which seeks to understand the human mind across times and cultures, is at odds with historical specificity. Yet these different disciplines can be brought to bear on an interpretation of an artwork as mutually constraining, contrasting views, or by positing the historical specificity of certain phenomenal, third-person accounts or by showing that certain historical periodisations are driven by phenomenal and affective perspectives.

⁴ Interview with Mark Francis for the brochure accompanying *Images from Elsewhere* exhibition at Fig-1 (50 Projects in 50 weeks), London, 2000.

⁵ See, for example, Mesquita et al. (2010). Myin and Veldman (2011) and Pepperell (2011) deal generally with the principles of what a situated aesthetics might entail but fail to provide details of how conceptual, attentional, affective or semantic complexity come together in the processing of external cues in specific artworks. What is missing is the kind of detailed matching exercise between internal resources and the specific details of artworks that conceptual blending and structure mapping can provide, and which I attempt to show in later pages.

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