

REVIEW

Art as an Amphibian Creature

Per Nilsson: *The Amphibian Stand: A Philosophical Essay Concerning Research Processes in Fine Art*. Umeå: H:ström-Text & Kultur, 2009. 175 pp.
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The *Amphibian Stand* is an interesting and in many ways original book, written by a Swedish philosopher of art, Dr. Per Nilsson, a man in his late forties who is an associate professor at the Umeå Academy of Fine Arts.

In his book, he says that he regards his project as a meta-theory, as a clarification of the pragmatic conditions for the meaningfulness of art. He tries to unify themes from, on the one hand, Arthur Danto and, on the other, Jürgen Habermas, on the one hand Immanuel Kant, on the other the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche and Jacques Derrida. Art is partly a problem solving activity in the Habermasian sense, partly a world disclosing activity in the Heideggerian/Derridean sense.

Nietzsche has a point when he underlines the fact that art is a part of life and that it has perspectivist aspects. Kant has a point when stressing that aesthetic judgement is not entirely beyond the realm of universal reason. Nietzsche takes a Dionysian view of art, Kant an Apollonian one, and both views are necessary. Nietzsche focuses on the artist (the sender), Kant on the recipient, and both perspectives can be unified. Nietzsche's focus on the artist makes art monological: One only listens to the monologue of the artist and forgets the possibility of dialogue between artist and viewer, forgets the necessity of interpretations performed by the viewer. Kant's idea of *sensus communis* points toward a dialogical conception of art. And Nilsson certainly draws on Kant's idea of aesthetic judgement as not providing generalizable knowledge and being an informed judgement rather than any use of algorithm.

Nilsson maintains that art is a form of knowledge in its own right and art can be a kind of research based knowledge (p. 10). Art can be considered as providing examples of possible consequences of scientific philosophical or political theories for the lives of situated human beings. Further, the critical potential of art can only be discussed in the form of examples. This means that the question of methodology, which artists use, or ought to use, in their research, will be left unanswered. To strive

for an articulation would be self-defeating (p. 11). However, Nilsson does not explain why this would be self-defeating.

Now to Nilsson's basic idea: Art is amphibian, i.e. it is like amphibian animals that live partly in the sea and partly on the shore, in a littoral landscape. It functions as a map of our littoral landscape, i.e. the ambivalent part of the human world, the part where the concretely sensuous meets abstract and normative thought.

Actually, sometimes Nilsson uses the term "artwork" in the sense of "visual artwork," in other cases in a wider sense, as when he discusses a poem by T. S. Eliot and uses a musical piece as an example (p. 68). A clarification would be a good thing.

The amphibian nature of an artwork is shown in the fact that it is a fusion of discourse(s) and an object. He uses "object" in a wider sense of the word; it does not have to be a thing, it can be purely conceptual.

Artworks actually are not things in any ordinary sense of the word. Therefore, it makes sense to say that they are partly the discourses that they produce, just as it makes sense to say that they only exist *qua* interpretations. The meaning of the artwork is a common product of the object and the discourses. Part of the conditions for such discourses is the overcoming of such distinctions between artist and viewer, object and interpreter (p. 54).

The basic reason why an artwork, by necessity, contains a moment of discursivity is that A is only an artwork under some interpretation, and interpretations only make sense in explicative discourses. We see here an attempt to fuse together some moments of Arthur Danto's and Jürgen Habermas' theories, Danto's idea of the artwork as essentially a result of interpretation and Habermas's contention that an interpretation requires an explicative discourse. Habermas echoes the private language argument; nothing can count as an interpretation unless it is publically checkable and if its validity can be decided upon in an open and free debate. In Nilsson's (and Habermas's) view, an aesthetic discourse is largely normative, in contrast to a scientific discourse, which is basically descriptive. The aesthetic discourse, however, has other dimensions as well. An artwork puts forth various validity claims, say, to authenticity or the importance of its moral message. These validity claims need to be tested and judged in discourses.

A musical composition is the sum of the musical piece itself and the actual or potential discourses it can generate. Notice that the object side and the discourse side are woven into each other. As several validity claims can be involved in the work, it can generate several explicative

discourses. In the discourses, arguments that originate in such aesthetic positions as expressivism, emotivism or cognitivism can be used in a discourse as expressing the individual perspectives of its participants (p. 68). And there is no such thing as the final word in an aesthetic discourse, the true interpretation; the world of aesthetic discourses is a world of fallibility. A good interpretation is an interpretation that helps us make better sense of a given object in a given context than a rival interpretation. Art is what the art world agrees to consider as art after engaging in a discourse. But this agreement is revisable. The same holds for science (p. 73–74). Like science, art is capable of producing knowledge but it is a non-scientific knowledge about man and society. This knowledge is, in contrast to scientific knowledge, not separable from the learning process itself. As I understand Nilsson, he thinks that the object of artistic knowledge does not exist out there as independent of the theories about it, but it is partly constituted by art itself. Similarly, moral, normative knowledge is partly about something that is constituted by moral norms, they do not exist in nature (here, Nilsson draws heavily on Habermas). This means that knowledge produced in art is contextual and perspectivistic, world disclosing. It does not provide us with well-tested nomological hypotheses, it rather provides us with points of view, fruitful ways of seeing things (this is my reconstruction of Nilsson’s arguments, put forth on page 77). Artistic or amphibian knowledge cannot be a set of justified true beliefs. Further, it cannot falsify general theories or ideas but can deconstruct them (p. 139–140). Yet again, Nilsson is a bit unclear: What does he mean by “falsifying ideas”? And by deconstruction does he mean the same as Derrida did?

Be that as it may, the artistic or amphibian knowledge is commonly invoked in cultural criticism. Nilsson expresses agreement with Bourriaud’s thesis that art is a practice in which theoretically informed knowledge is tested in various contexts (p. 78). Now, language has a visual and sensuous side, which we usually do not notice. One of the cognitive functions of artworks is to help us notice this side. In amphibian knowledge production, the sensuous and verbal elements of language are brought together (p. 89). Not only does language have hidden visual elements, paintings have hidden verbal moments. And we obtain amphibian or artistic knowledge when we discover these moments. For instance, Mieke Bal has pointed out that a certain Rembrandt painting can be understood as “saying” “rape is murder.” I guess that this interpretation only makes sense in an explicative discourse and by no means can it be regarded as the absolutely correct one.

The knowledge of art is less about discovering an abstract human essence and more about self-expression or even self-creation. We are plastic creatures of language, and therefore artistic language can change who we are, not least thanks to art's world disclosing potential (this is again my reconstruction of Nilsson's arguments, page 96, 103, and elsewhere). The question of who we are or want to be is more aesthetical than ethical, Nilsson says. The aesthetical moment is often hidden or disguised as an ethical one (p. 102). My question is: Was Ayaan Hirsi Ali's decision to become a Western person an aesthetical one? As I see it, she took an ethical decision, be it a right or a wrong one. I cannot see the aesthetical moments in her decision.

But this does not mean that Nilsson ignores the moral moment of art, far from that. Art is, in a sense, action; discourses are the products of communicative acts and acts are typically not morally neutral; they can be judged in the moral dimension (p. 118).

Now to Nilsson's contention that artistic/amphibian knowledge is based on research. He says that such a research is a practice through which we apply a form of knowledge to an object in order to gain knowledge (p. 143). He agrees with Paul Feyerabend that traditions and rationality cannot be separated, that there is a dialectical relation between them; Nilsson seems to think that art is based on a different tradition than science and therefore has different standards for research. He argues that each artwork is a tradition unto itself, and in this world of artistic/amphibian research, Feyerabendian anarchism is a good thing (whether it would a good thing in science too, Nilsson does not say). Artistic research is like qualitative research; it is not by chance that qualitative research often employs artistic means. Norman K. Denzin's and Yvonna S. Lincoln's characterization (a–f) of qualitative research fits artistic research admirably: (a) The observer is situated (Nilsson: In art the artist is too); (b) The interviews in qualitative research are visualizing aspects of the world (Nilsson: The artist certainly does that too!); (c) The world is transformed, not only observed in qualitative research (Nilsson: Art transfigures and discloses the world); (d) Nevertheless, one represents the world in qualitative research (Nilsson: Art does that too, by disclosing perspectives on the world); (e) Qualitative research interprets its objects (Nilsson: Art does too); (f) Qualitative research deals with meaning (Nilsson: The same holds true for art).

So, this book is quite original and inspiring. What is really original about it is first of all the powerful metaphors of the littoral and amphibian; secondly, the connected idea of an artwork as being part object,

part discourse; thirdly, the contention that art is a form of qualitative research.

But Nilsson should have started the book with an explanation of these metaphors. He should also have used more space to clarify the concept of discourse and should have situated himself vis-à-vis Habermas. And, as I have already hinted at, now and then he expresses himself in a somewhat unclear fashion. Sometimes, he forgets to develop his arguments, cf. what I said earlier about his statement on page 11 about a certain attempt at being self-defeating. On page 49 he says that human self-creation is limited by biology and social context, but he does not argue in favor of this contention. Further, it is bit strange to refer to the visual as Dionysian. Nietzsche referred to the visual arts as Apollonian, music Dionysian. And of course Nilsson knows this, and he is entitled to use these concepts in his own way, but he should have explained why he does not use them like Nietzsche did. He also tends to repeat himself needlessly, for instance, he says several times that the artwork is a combination of object and discourse. The book should have been polished a bit; it looks a bit like the second to last version before publication. I advise the author to develop his ideas, write articles, and submit them to leading journals in the field.

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