Essay

AWKWARD BEDFELLOWS?
VISUAL ART AND ANALOGY

Peter Belton

"Seeing is about being struck that something is, or can be, connected to something else."[1]

This essay is my response to reading "Art After Philosophy" (Joseph Kosuth, 1969). Kosuth tells us that, to be meaningful, art must necessarily make statements and that these declamations tend to present as tautologies. My argument starts with the proposition that analogy has no resemblance to tautology.

In his essay "Art After Philosophy" Joseph Kosuth uses the terms "use" and "function" throughout his text. My understanding is that art was, and is, circumscribed by its function. Function defined the value of such traditional practices as architecture, sculpture, painting and printmaking. Functions have their rationale in socially prescribed behaviours such as rituals and served the necessary preservation and transmission of cultural memory. Functions were understood to be reflections of belief and therefore required defence. In this paradigm art was, and is, central to the existence and survival of culture, as culture is to society. That there were – in the interests of continuity and the transmission of ideas – conventions of art practice was central to this defence. These conventions were enveloped in forms which came to be understood as aesthetic signifiers and signs.

Kosuth's argument is that aesthetics should be separated from art in our thinking, because aesthetics deals with *opinions* on perception of the world in general. Historically, any philosophical discussion referring to beauty and taste had been bound to discuss art as well. Kosuth states that any claim to a conceptual connection between art and aesthetics did not, however, stand up to philosophical scrutiny. The reason, he said, why the notion of a connection was never seriously challenged before recent times (Duchamp) was "not only that the morphological characteristics of art perpetuated the continuity of this error, but also because the apparent functions of art (depiction of religious themes, portraiture of aristocrats, etc.) used art to cover up art."[2]

Kosuth's rejection of art being defined through the language of "formalist" aesthetics fudges the point that formalism never was or is an end in itself. Formalism was, and is, essentially a linguistic means to an end, or ends. In the light of this, his argument that (historically) the apparent functions of art used art to cover up art also opens up questions about means to ends. Morphology and formalisation are means to the communication and interpretation of ideas. We can recognise an artist's intent because … .

Curiously, having asserted that "if one is questioning the nature of painting one cannot be questioning the nature of art," Kosuth concedes in the same paragraph that "painting is a kind of art."[3] What is he trying to say? Painting is a transactional process in which we are cognisant of traditions of working with media and with histories of ideas. Value and identity are, and were, established with reference to these working traditions and to the ideas which give them form. Any art product may challenge tradition, yet the point of its production is that it is culturally situated.

Kosuth: "In fact it is Marcel Duchamp whom we can credit with first giving art its identity. One can certainly see a tendency toward this self-identification in art beginning with Manet and Cézanne through to Cubism, but their

works were timid and ambiguous by comparison with Duchamp."[4] How is this really so? And how come the apparent ambiguity in Manet and Cézanne is deprecated? In both cases, the ambiguities presented were to be found in the *way* seeing was presented. There were ambiguities of structure which destabilised concrete form and brought the viewer to question the representation of space and, by association, time. The idea was seen as something to be found through a negotiation of seeing. In Cézanne's case the declamatory has been replaced by the question: "is this what I see?" Cézanne's shift from declamation was not a timid response to an idea about representation, it was revolutionary.

"Art operates through a logic," we are told, "derived from the formal consequences of our definitions of Art."[5] Hence Kosuth's pronouncement that art must become tautological. If art – as Cézanne demonstrates – proposes questions, is it necessarily tautological? Do propositions, by definition, amount to tautologies? Maybe, in the "speak" of academics, they become so. Kosuth sees the "unreality" of realist art as due to its being framed as an art proposition in synthetic terms; a clever, if facile, *entendre* by which he claims the realist paradigm in art must be verified empirically, as in "it looks like, so it must be." He asserts that realism's synthetic state does not return one to a dialogue with the larger framework of questions about the nature of art.[6] In his argument, the artist must be an analyst who is not directly concerned with the physical properties of things, but rather with the way in which art is concerned with conceptual growth and how propositions are seen to be logically following their growth. And, he goes on to say that, as these propositions are identified as linguistic, but not factual, they do not describe the behaviour of physical or mental objects. Rather, they "express definitions of art or the formal consequences of any definition of art."[7]

If any definition of art presents as a tautology, this suggests a practice which cannot risk the "expressive" heresies suggested by synthesis or analogy. Kosuth's dismissal of Pollock's self-expression "because those kinds of subjective meanings are useless to anyone other than those involved with him personally"[8] ignores the fact that we all have those "me too" moments of recognition and relating to things. Indeed, connecting is what makes us human. This leads me to look at analogy in relation to the process of visualising as a function of being.

If metaphor is explicit, at least in its structural resemblance to its referent, analogy is its loose child inasmuch as there are "spaces" of ambiguity created through the language used. In visual art this amounts to saying that the "how" of depiction suggests rather than closes meaning.[9] An example of analogical drawing is described by Michael Phillipson and Chris Fisher in their essay "Seeing Becoming Drawing" (1999) when discussing Bonnard's landscape drawing practice:

> And yet it is precisely (this) "place," the place of our everyday existence, that Bonnard's drawings unsettle. It seems that all the conditions which Bonnard assembled as terms of his working practice culminate in ways of making that constitute his drawing as a strategy (but not a method) of avoidance. The little fixings that his marks are, are dedicated to the avoidance of place and placing. For perhaps what Bonnard draws out of the intensities of his looking is not the Real as some thing "over there," but what Deleuze and Guattari call the "precept," which is the intensity of the sensible; this intensity is "what acts in depth and is incarnated in the visible world." Intensity provoked not by the resemblance of 1+1 (drawing as mimesis), but the affinity of a merging, a coalescing, an interpenetration via contiguity, a breaking down of boundaries – drawing's immersion in the Real. Bonnard is revealing to us that what drawing reveals to us is not "nature" but the precept whose intensity tears it away from the conventions of perception that tie the latter to resemblance. Drawing gives us the difference that intensity of the sensible makes our becoming. The marks set up not place but perhaps "atmosphere," where "atmosphere" is that which, while we can see through it, heats, cools, suffuses, and overwhelms us. Atmosphere has a thickness which encloses and supports our becoming. This is what we feel in the drawings – the thickness and solidity of the atmosphere that we have to see through in order to recognize "place."[10]

If analogy is not a closure of meaning but rather functions as a means to recognition and communicating "identity with," this is because the compass of suggestion employed by analogy reaches some part of all of us. At an intuitive

level we feel we have been there. That moment of recognition attaches the image to us. We are paused in its moment. From that moment, given that we are captured by interest, we will begin to attach our own meanings to the event, to reflect, compare and contrast, adjust perception and, possibly, find new connections. Analogy, therefore, is a means rather than an end and in the process of being it destabilises its referents. Analogy presents us with ambiguities of reading and with negotiable understandings. Analogy requires us to make an effort to meet a proposition. Analogy, it follows, functions in a state of "in-between-ness."

Yet, we live in a world where in-between-ness seems to be suspect. If analysis is valued over synthesis must we construct, in order to rationalise an understanding, explicit meaning even where there is uncertainty, ambivalence and ambiguity? If so, this is the nightmare universe visualised by William Blake and given form in his demiurge creation, Urizen, who represented for Blake the originating materialist spirit of the Industrial Revolution and its consequence of monolithic ideological and social orderings.

With regard to production and consumption, art practices will reflect the mores of the society where they are to be found. In all forms of art, including music as well as visual art, dance and spoken or written communications through which we depict, we have seen analogy displaced by unambiguous declamations, with a resulting loss of connection to the qualities of ideas. We should question to what extent the in-between-ness of conversation has been displaced by declamation. We might question how it has come about that both spoken and visual poetry seems to have lost much of its power to reach us. Declamation, it would seem, allows no ambiguity. It is not dealing with approximations, with in-between-ness. A declamation – as found in allegory – is not interested in the negotiation of meaning proffered by *entendre*. It is specific. This signals that.

> In contrast to the intrinsic textuality and non-representational abstraction of allegory… analogy is demonstrative or evidentiary practice – putting the visible into relationship with the invisible and manifesting the effect of that momentary unison. From the iconophile perspective, the earthly or natural image establishes a temporary resemblance with a hidden mystery that one cannot otherwise see. All of analogy's simile-generalizing figures are thus incarnational. They materialize, display and disseminate an enigma that escapes words.[11]

So where does Barbara Stafford's insight put us if we are to define function in art? The stakes in this question determine how we see ourselves to be. This is about self-determination through taking the responsibility to make our own connections, to relate, to recognise and to follow a quiet inner voice of conscience. This transcends questions about "use." It qualifies them, the quantifiable.

If one accepts this line of argument, an artwork can function as both allegory which we read in the *"what"* of its subject and theme, and as analogy in the *"how"* of its depiction. Can we ever present a subject, or theme, neutrally? *How* a subject or theme is presented becomes an ethical question. The point of my essay has been to argue that if art is to make sense for us, analogy, which is about connection, proffers a way which is not prescriptive, not proscriptive, and which allows us to negotiate, by means of the way we depict, a reconciliation of seeing and knowing.

WHERE DO I SEE ANALOGY IN MY OWN PRACTICE?

How and in what way might the process and resulting form of this painting be analogical? Although I have worked the body with a heavy oil stick, which gives it a certain stillness, the figure is, in parts, dissolving into

Image 1: *Flying Man*, Te Anau (1998-2008), oils, varnish and tissue on paper, on board 1600 × 1200 mm (diptych).

its setting. Is the man broken, breaking, immaterial and yet somehow immanent? The drawing does not particularise so much as suggest. We might ask how this presents?

With regard to the depicted moment, the working of materials to suggest mountains and lake are treated with a similar idea. We see tissue paper suffused with varnish, paint and casting sand, intended to present us with materiality; physical stuff. Yet, the shapes which are worked into the ground of the painting also remind us of a process of form becoming; being fashioned out of stuff. The "air" is palpable too. Is the "stuff" holding the man in suspension resisting any aspiration to fly? The shapes in the "stuff" which suggest a site are unclosed, open to reading. The tensions in this work are between its materiality and weight, on the one hand, and the allusive and the ungrounded. Is this about becoming light? If there is an analogical process in the making of this painting, it is to be found in the play of opposed elements of matter and "space." It might be found, too, in the character of the mark-making which signals the decision of the making hand. Colour and tonal shifts simply suggest the void in which the figure seems to be held in a state of suspension and the painted surface becomes the "fixing" of a moment.

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Solo and group exhibitions with Peter Belton's work have been held at the Suter Gallery, Nelson; Dunedin Public Art Gallery; Gallery 101, Collins Street, Melbourne; The Dowse; the Sargeant Gallery; CoCa Gallery, Christchurch; Elva Bett Gallery, Wellington; Gallery 5, Dunedin; Peter Rae Gallery; and the Otago Museum Gallery, amongst others. His most recent solo exhibition was at the Peter Rae Gallery, Dunedin, in October 2007. Peter has work in public collections in Nelson and Dunedin and in private collections in New Zealand, Australia, the UK, France and the US.

Peter also works as set and properties designer for Daniel Belton & Good Company, producers of contemporary dance performances and dance films which have won acclaim on the international festivals circuit, particularly in Europe.

1   BM Stafford, *Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 138.

2   J Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy" in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, eds K Stiles and P Selz (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 1969), 841-6, at 841.

3   Ibid., 842.

4   Ibid., 844.

5   Ibid.

6   Ibid.

7   Ibid.

8   Ibid.

9   P Belton, "Making Sense of Depiction," Scope: Art, *1* (November 2006), 16-24.

10   M Phillipson and C Fisher, "Seeing Becoming Drawing: The Interplay of Eyes, Hands and Surfaces in the Drawings of Pierre Bonnard," in *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual*, eds I Heywood and B Sandywell (New York: Routledge, 1999), 123-42, at 136.

11   Stafford, *Visual Analogy*, 10.