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Objects and aesthetic attention

Nicolas Bullot

(Translated from [French](#) by Marcel Lieberman)

paper [printable version]

A list of multimedia examples is available on the page [Collections \(AAOBR\)](#).

"I probably saw the motion of the wheel as an excellent antidote to the regular motion of the individual around the contemplated object." Marcel Duchamp, on the *Bicycle Wheel*.

"The ensemble becomes an esthetic provocation: beauty as a refusal of habit." Helmut Lachenmann, on *Pression*.

I shall present here an hypothesis concerning the nature of attention directed towards works of art, while considering the constraints that the latter exert on cognitive abilities. This hypothesis fits into recent work in aesthetic theory that seeks to take into account research on cognitive abilities. This work centers its analyses on aptitudes that are both (i) studied within the cognitive sciences and (ii) essentially involved in aesthetic behaviors. According to the hypothesis that I want to defend - call it **H**, the capacity of selective attention has this dual status. Before presenting the content of the hypothesis, I would like to clarify the meanings of the main concepts to be used.

The concept of selective attention refers to the abilities studied simultaneously by cognitive psychology, neuroscience and the philosophy of mind. This research seeks to understand how, among the totality of information that is accessible to the sensory systems, the selection and binding of information relevant to an agent's action and knowledge is carried out — especially in the case of *spatio-temporal objects* (henceforth objectST) to which attention is directed.

In order to refer to the system formed by artistic artifacts and the agents who perceive them, the concept of *artistic device* will be used. To say that an artistic device is operating, it is necessary that there be an interaction between two types of conditions:

- i. a sensory- and motor-anchoring situation that corresponds to a set of target elements (sculptures or paintings, acoustical or theatrical events), and
- ii. a set of agents who explore this situation and adopt aesthetic attitudes by interacting with the target elements.

The *anchoring situation* of an artistic device corresponds to the space-time region that is explored when an agent directs his attention to the artistic device.

Schematically, it concerns, for example, the content and boundaries of art galleries, museum rooms, concert halls, movie theaters, architectural spaces and structures, or also books and electronic publications that have artistic content. The notion of anchoring refers to a fundamental function of sensory and motor systems: to ensure the proper placement of the agent's body within the situation, in particular through bi-directional access to the elements present within the situation. In the case of artistic devices, anchoring situations are at least partially artificial, or artifactual, contexts that agents must perceive in order to obtain information about the artwork that they're exploring.

discussion [printable version]

Moderators: Noga Arikha, Gloria Origgi

- ▶ [Immersion and reflection in art](#) (0 replies)
Jérôme Dokic, 26-Jan-03 14:33 UT
- ▶ [Précision](#) (0 replies)
Bernard Gortais, 24-Jan-03 13:35 UT
- ▶ [New examples suggested by Jerrold Levinson : minimal art, optical art, 'trompe-l'œil'](#) (1 reply)
Nicolas Bullot, 22-Jan-03 18:46 UT
- ▶ [Le doigt qui montre la lune](#) (1 reply)
Bernard Gortais, 21-Jan-03 18:10 UT
- ▶ [Déjouer la routine](#) (3 replies)
Bernard Gortais, 17-Jan-03 15:13 UT
- ▶ [Looking in](#) (10 replies)
Noga Arikha, 15-Jan-03 20:49 UT
- ▶ [Situation d'ancrage objets cibles](#) (3 replies)
Gloria Origgi, 14-Jan-03 12:22 UT
- ▶ [Procédures d'exposition ou de représentation?](#) (2 replies)
Jérôme Pelletier, 14-Jan-03 8:51 UT
- ▶ [Procédures d'exposition ou de représentation?](#) (1 reply)
Jérôme Pelletier, 14-Jan-03 8:38 UT
- ▶ [Objets](#) (1 reply)
Clotilde Lampignano, 13-Jan-03 11:36 UT
- ▶ [Replies to Dominic Lopez on explanation, cognitive mechanisms, routine inhibitions](#) (10 replies)
Nicolas Bullot, 08-Jan-03 19:41 UT
- ▶ [Expérience précognitive](#) (1 reply)
José Luis Guijarro, 08-Jan-03 8:48 UT
- ▶ [Une vue partielle de l'ART](#) (12 replies)
José Luis Guijarro, 07-Jan-03 11:33 UT

Note: yellow triangles (▶) indicate new messages that have been posted since your last visit to the site.

It is plausible that, within an artistic device, the interactions between agents and the elements included in the anchoring situation involve subjecting the agents' selective attention abilities to certain constraints or operations. This idea can be specified more clearly in the framework of the theory of objectST perception. I propose the following hypothesis:

H: Certain artistic devices are based on inhibition processes of subsets of routines that typically monitor objectST-based attention.

The most general argument in favor of this proposition proceeds by comparing ordinary perception with aesthetic perception. In fact, ordinary perception seems to be based on the application of routines that monitor, among other cognitive processes, objectST-based selective attention, whereas the interaction with certain artistic situations appears instead to result in inhibiting the execution of certain routines. In other words, hypothesis **H** assumes that the interaction with certain artistic anchoring situations involves interrupting the normal course of perceptual processes by preventing, or altering, the execution of certain routines.

Why need we accept that, in interactions with situations encountered in daily life, our attention is monitored by routines?

First, routines are developed through learning in the performance of recurrent acts. Insofar as ordinary activities include objectST-based recurrent acts, it is natural that every individual develops and actualizes routines — that is, operations that enable one to accomplish a set of habitual acts that are triggered by similar contexts. Moreover, the speed and reliability of our interactions with objectsST will largely depend upon the existence of such routines.

Second, the idea that the perception of objects is based on the application of routines that monitor selective attention seems to be relatively well-supported by experimental research on the role of attention and ocular fixation in motor-visual monitoring, required for the normal execution of daily activities. One can, for example, refer to the work of M. Land, N. Mennie and J. Rusted. Certain generalizations seem to be valid. In particular, the organization of action appears to be structured on the basis of objectST-based sensory-motor routines.

Third, one can make use of a sufficiently rich and developed concept of “routines” to account for the variety of daily acts that can be monitored by routines. For example, the following operations are examples of prototypical routines:

1. “determining if x is inside or outside of y”
2. “fixing with one’s eyes objectST x, and then manipulating x”
3. “recognizing the prototypical movements of household objectsST”
4. “recognizing the sound x that triggers behavior y”

Three important observations are currently made in the literature. (i)The execution of a routine is generally linked to automatic procedures that seem to be carried out with neither the voluntary monitoring nor the awareness of the operation taking place (or at least without a direct awareness of the spatio-temporal details of the current operation). (ii)Routines do not only concern the movement of the muscles and body, but they are also at work during the monitoring of mental activities linked to the identification and recognition of objectsST. (iii)The execution of a routine can determine or control the choice of attentional selection targets; however, the relationship between routines and selective attention is complex (since it depends upon the precise conception one adopts regarding these two notions).

Ordinary perception is thus “routine” in a non-trivial sense. Yet, the acknowledgment of the role of routines in ordinary activities is not valid, *stricto-sensu*, for describing the specificity of the perception of artistic devices. In fact, many works of art rely on the construction of situations that interfere with the application of subsets of routines.

First, a general reason has to do with the display and presentation procedure used in artistic devices. Given any objectST (or the objectST's characteristic signal, such as its acoustical signature), the fact that it is displayed in the space-time of the anchoring situation of an artistic device generally amounts to removing it from the domain of use for ends other than its display in the situation. This often involves the inhibition of grasping gestures: in the majority of cases, handling the objectST is prevented or forbidden (via glass cases, stages, barriers for maintaining a required distance). In fact, its display in a device thus amounts to removing it from the routines and interactions to which objectsST with ordinary household or industrial use are subject.

Second, at least in the history of art, many works have been dedicated to the representation and questioning of the status of objectsST — and to the problems concerning the criteria of objecthood.

A number of artistic experiments have been carried out on the perception of objectST properties; many of them involve the construction of situations whose properties prevent the execution of subsets of routines. I shall present two types of examples.

A first set of examples is found in Marcel Duchamp's readymades and in the installation works that include household artifacts, like those of Oldenburg or Lavier. A second set of important examples is found in the research on electro-acoustic music that is developed on the basis recorded noises.

I would like to conclude by posing a question that to me seems to be important: what might be the function of a mechanism that inhibits certain subsets of routines? In following a line of thought that needs to be examined more carefully, one can imagine that adequate responses will have the following form.

A first type of response is as follows: it depends on the artistic devices in question, or the moment being considered in the development of an artistic device. An analysis of each particular case is thus called for, since each artistic device puts into play a particular inhibition strategy. Another type of response offers a general explanation: the alteration of a routine can contribute to one's becoming aware of a property of objectST x to which the routine is typically applied. As a result, one of the functions of these alterations could be to favor the awareness, or meta-representation, of a series of properties (precisely that series on which the routine gets blocked). This consequently makes possible the collective or public awareness of the series in question, in connection with the communicational and critical function of artwork, or its contribution to perceptual learning.