

## ASSEMBLAGE AS RORSCHACH: EMPIRICAL HERMENEUTIC AESTHETICS AND THE ART SPECTATOR

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*A Cornell box*

The aesthetic experience is not a single, universal reaction (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). All responses to art are historically grounded, inseparable from ideologies and social values. There are no “pure” aesthetic experiences when considering spectators’ responses to art or other aesthetically oriented stimuli (Bourdieu, 1984). Most events in consciousness, including our response to visual art, are built from culturally defined contents as well as from personal meanings developed throughout an individual’s life. Aesthetic experience is not a linear accumulation of knowledge however, but a bewilderment of ideas and images that are productively brought together in a way that allows us “to *see* the idea embodied in a work and to *see* the work as an instance of that idea” (Davey, 1999, p. 8; italics in the original).

The research described in this paper is part of an on-going empirical study to examine spectator response to non-representational and non-coalescent visual art. That is, visual art that does not clearly or obviously depict a particular scene or venue and is an amalgam of materials, images, words and forms. Using the hermeneutics of seeing as a theoretical guide (Davey, 1999) this research seeks to empirically understand the experience of art spectators as they view non-representational and three-dimensional art, known as *assemblage*. More specifically, this investigation explores the art spectator’s aesthetic experience of viewing assemblage, by looking at the interaction of emotion,

cognition, memory, meaning, and unconscious factors during this experience. To perceive the possibility of linking parts to form a whole when viewing disparate elements, as one does when viewing assemblage, is to realize the essence underlying visual thinking (Arnheim, 1969) and visual understanding (Dewey, 1934). The artist, in creating visual art, produces concrete images exhibiting how the visual system in the brain maps the changing internal and external environment (Stafford, 2001). But what of the spectator of visual art, what happens to the spectator in their experience of viewing art? When a spectator sees non-representational assemblage such as a Cornell box, a Duchamp ready-made or one of Beuys' multiples, a complex and nonlinear array of neuronal activity occurs in her/his attempt to gain insight and understanding of the work. Brain-based neuronal activity<sup>i</sup>, which is triggered by what happens to us as viewers when we see art, is signified by both *personal-historical* factors, related to the intricate interplay of knowledge, discrimination, memory, and level of familiarity, as well as by the *visual properties* of the object.

One approach to understand this complex interplay is to empirically examine spectator response to non-representational assemblage art. The coupling or linking of the external<sup>ii</sup>, with the internal, involves both emotional and cognitive processes. An attempt to comprehend non-representational assemblage art requires the spectator to link several forms of representation seen in the artwork. The process of identifying, and possibly linking, the parts of an object to form a whole<sup>iii</sup> can subsequently provide information about the complexity of cooperation between conscious and unconscious and the “generative tension between sight and in-sight” (Davey, 1999, p3). Understanding how spectators experience non-representational assemblage art may help illuminate the numerous ways the psyche experiences the disruption—and the resulting reintegration—of disconnected components into a whole.



*Another Cornell box*

Making use of objects found in New York alleys, and bought in secondhand shops and discount department stores, as well as printed material from newspapers, magazines, books and letters, the American visual artist Joseph Cornell<sup>iv</sup>, first created *dossiers* crammed with materials in preparation for creating box constructions. From these dossiers Cornell chose images and objects to place in three-dimensional boxes. By presenting disparate images and objects simultaneously, his three-dimensional constructions challenge the viewer to actively link conscious and unconscious, known and unknown, obvious and uncertain, in an attempt, not at interpreting a predetermined meaning, but of acquiring information about what is understood (Heidegger, 1977). The box and its contents, as aesthetic form (Rose, 1996), also become an analogy for many of the structures, functions and concerns of psychoanalytic theory and clinical work. Viewing a Cornell box as a gestalt supplies material equivalence to match the qualitative felt-sense of an inner state, thus acting as a kind of Rorschach experience providing both psychoanalytic, neuronal, and aesthetic information.

The overarching research project involves four different groups of participants<sup>v</sup>. The research reported in this paper involves one of those groups and is comprised of individuals who have extensive exposure to Cornell's box constructions. This group includes professional collectors, curators and writers. Using the assemblage work of Cornell as an example of noncoalescent art, fifteen individuals were interviewed about their responses to his work (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). All participants in this group were asked nine identical semi-structured questions. Additional questions were posed as needed in relation to generating information relevant to this investigation.

Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and coded using Atlas ti/4.1 software<sup>vi</sup>. Responses were analyzed quantitatively, through content analysis, and qualitatively (Camic, Rhodes & Yardley, 2003), using Yin's (1994, 2003) multiple case study methodology. Yin's methodology allows several theoretical perspectives to be simultaneously employed during analysis. For the purposes of this research Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson's (1990) aesthetic experience theory, psychoanalytic contributions from Winnicott (1971) and Rose (1996), the work of Vygotsky (1931/1971) and the hermeneutics of seeing (Davey, 1999) were utilized.

Participants in this group had between 8 and 50 years of continual exposure to Cornell's work. The next phase of the research will examine responses to Cornell's work by those with little or no exposure to his work. While it is difficult to sum up the reactions of these participants in this limited space, evidence was seen of both cognitive and unconscious processes playing a vital role in the aesthetic experience. References, by all 15 participants, to numerous associative memories and affective states when viewing the art was clearly evident. Viewing the work also solicited an understanding of oneself and of one's being-in-the-world. For many, the aesthetic experience of this work was a private matter, "to be left with by oneself", to "preserve an epiphany in time", and to "experience the spiritual".

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<sup>i</sup> “Neuronal” in this sense corresponds to sensory cells not merely copying external physical reality but reacting to a specific stimulus by slightly altering its physiological constitution (Breidbach, 1993)

<sup>ii</sup> What is visually *seen* externally, as opposed to what is *experienced* internally

<sup>iii</sup> This is also the essential underlying interpretive framework used to understand patient responses to the inkblot images of the Rorschach Inkblot Technique

<sup>iv</sup> For those not familiar with the work of Joseph Cornell please look at The Artchive web site: <http://artchive.com> and at Hartigan, Hopps, Vine & Lehrman (2003). *Joseph Cornell: Shadowplay...eterniday*. New York & London: Thames & Hudson

<sup>v</sup> Other groups that are part of this research but not reported in this paper include: “visual artists and art students group”, “artistically informed general public group”, and a “not interested in art group”

<sup>vi</sup> Software developed for analysis of qualitative data at Technischen Universität Berlin and sold through Scolari/Sage