

What is Art?

– why I do it, and why I think it is important.

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“Yet what if the counter-project of the next four centuries were to turn philosophy into an art? We would have "Philosophy as Vigorous Art" rather than Husserl's "Philosophy as Rigorous Science." In being transformed from a science into an art, philosophy regains its original character as Eros. In some ways this erotic model is the basic aspiration of object-oriented philosophy: the only way, in the present philosophical climate, to do justice to the love of wisdom that makes no claim to be an actual wisdom.”
(Graham Harman¹)

Introduction

We can only grasp the appearance of reality and how things seem to our limited senses. Even mathematics, and hence logic, cannot help us - as Kurt Gödel proved with his incompleteness theorems.

In this paper, I want to ponder *why* I do art. Why does *anyone* do art? And *what* is art?

I have been studying and practicing art for over three decades. Despite various researches and attempts to get a satisfying answer to the question – what is art? – no-one has been able to provide me with an adequate answer. At present, the popular definitions sound like: *Art is art, if you say it to be art*. That to me seems to be a favorite one among artists and art theorists alike. Well, this definition could go for almost anything and really diminishes the subject to everything – and hence nothing – since it is everywhere.

I realize the enormity of this attempt. Throughout my career as an artist, I have encountered numerous art theorists, artists and art historians, who restrain from even asking this question, let alone attempt to answer it. But, what an illudinal attempt to practice and write about art – without some sort of a definition of the term.

So, what is Art?

For me, in this paper, the quest is related to the understanding of reality and if we (I) can really grasp it.

A short disclaimer might be appropriate at this point: I am not a philosopher, nor an academic and neither do I aspire to be. I am an artist – and I'm pondering these questions in an attempt to answer my own thoughts about why I do the things I do.

What is art?

I suggest starting with a little investigation into its possible origin.

The definition of art has changed and evolved throughout history. Specialists who study humanity and its history tend to agree that making tools, such as instruments can be an indicator of our humble beginning of art making. In fact, making instruments came about as early as tool making in general; so in fact we could make a flute as soon as we could make a hammer or a spade. We also have artifacts about early attempts of what I call visual communications. We can only speculate about if singing and dancing came about prior to that. Music, singing and dancing, is surely an artform and is definitely used to communicate. But is that to say that art is a communication tool? And even more significantly: Is language?

I will claim, without hesitation, that art's origin can be traced to the origin of the human language. It seems evident that the origin of the human language may be traced to animalistic sounds and gestures we witness among various species we can observe in our world. This might lead us to deduct that language is in its foundation some sort of a communication tool. A scream of warning, affection sounds, sounds of aggression, mating sounds etc., all seem logically to be the origin of vocal communication and hence human language. Indeed, vocal communication is often assumed to be the foundation of human language. This is the standard view among many scientists; but I want to put forward a notion that visual communication, like hand

¹Graham Harman, *The Third Table. (Documenta und Museum Fridericianum Veranstaltungs-GmbH 2012)* 15

gestures, facial expression and even images, might also have played a role in language evolution from the start. Almost all animals use sounds as some form of communication – but not all. Most animals also have some sort of visual communication system. Animals like fish, who can not use vocal cords to produce sounds, use visual communication like flapping of fins and swimming in circles. It is therefore not unlikely that visual communication came about at least around the same time as vocal communication – in fact it is not unlikely that visual communication came *before* vocal communication.

However humble in its origins, something happened to the human species that started an evolution of a sophisticated language. And it has been stated: A language is *not* a mere communicational tool. In fact, it is a rather sophisticated system of thought processes. Thought processes based on grammar and logic; and hence a system of understanding, memorizing and thinking – something that our cousins, the great apes did not evolve.²

Perhaps it was art?

It is not far out, to conclude that various cave paintings found over the world were made before a real vocal language evolved. A painting of a bison could communicate a certain message for example. An image says more than a thousand words! Perhaps image communication came about before communication through words? Could it be that the invention of image communication evolved the human species into the sophisticated language being we are today?

I find it likely.

Picture communication could well have established a certain kind of communication, before a vocal and written language evolved; not to mention before some sort of an alphabet was established. What is more: I will state that the origin of image-making likely triggered something in our cognitive abilities that resulted in our thought processes being shifted.

So, the scenario I want you to imagine is this: Is it possible that two humans first communicated through image gesture and/or image making, rather than first through exchanging vocal sounds?

First vocal sounds – then words? *or*: First image making – then words – then spoken language?

Just think about it.

I will state that picture communication is the eve of sophisticated language in the human world and hence the eve of thinking and being aware. This primal image making is something deeply involved in the fabric of our species and is in fact the origin of both art and language. If that is to be established as truth, we can deduce that art is a communication tool equal to the human language – in fact art is a language. In my theory, it's a precursor to the human language and thought; something that triggered a cognitive shift and made us human.

Perhaps it is fair to say that the real origin of a human sophisticated language - as distinguished from animal sounds and primitive communication/cognitive tools, found among f.ex. in abes and other primates – is to be traced to the invention of the alphabet. It is a well established fact that the letters of the alphabet originate from images. Seen in this manner we can see that art – whatever that is – can be equated with language or even, as I suggest, predates it and is in fact the precursor of it. On top of that; art and images can communicate ideas between individuals and groups, just as the written and spoken words. What is even more crucial – art and images can commute concepts, not even spoken language can.

² “I show that there are good arguments and evidence to boot that support the language as an instrument of thought hypothesis. The underlying mechanisms of language, comprising of expressions structured hierarchically and recursively, provide a perspective (in the form of a conceptual structure) on the world, for it is only via language that certain perspectives are available to us and to our thought processes. These mechanisms provide us with a uniquely human way of thinking and talking about the world that is different to the sort of thinking we share with other animals. If the primary function of language were communication then one would expect that the underlying mechanisms of language will be structured in a way that favours successful communication. I show that not only is this not the case, but that the underlying mechanisms of language are in fact structured in a way to maximise computational efficiency, even if it means causing communicative problems. Moreover, I discuss evidence from comparative, neuropathological, developmental, and neuroscientific evidence that supports the claim that language is an instrument of thought.” Eran Asoulin, Research – Language as an instrument of thought. Glossa a journal of General Linguistics. <https://www.glossa-journal.org/articles/10.5334/gjgl.34/>

The Third Table

There is a caveat here: As in any attempt for the human mind to understand the world, we must first attempt to assure that we can trust what we deem to be and what only seems to be. What is real and what only seems real? I am bringing this into the scene, since defining art (or anything for that matter) we must first investigate if we can trust our senses and logic to really grasp reality, or if we are just debating something that seems, but is not even real - like for example in Plato's cave.

I want to take a look into an interesting idea, specifically found in Graham Harman's philosophy coined – Object Oriented Ontology. The thought goes that perhaps art can provide us with an understanding of the world that neither empiric study nor deductive logic can provide.

In a paper, written for the Documenta 13 catalogue “The Third Table”, Graham puts forward the notion that reality is neither the “thing” we can see and feel - nor the composition of basic particles that we can deduct from scientific understanding, but something in-between – The Third Table. It is here that my interest lies as an artist and a student. Graham Harman is putting forward a notion that art could be the pathway to this “Third Table”. This echoes my personal philosophy and art practise. As insinuated before, I believe that something triggered our shift as a species into the evolution of a sophisticated language. That in turn probably evoked our cognitive capabilities and the invention of logic; and that henceforth catapulted the human species into the life form we are today, with all its ups and downs.

And that something was - art.

It might be quite by the book to think that first evolved language and then art derived from that. However, I find that implausible. I think if anything art - whatever that is - evolved in us first and that gave cause to language and logic. So perhaps art predates language? and art is the cause of logic? But art is not logic. These are two different properties, like two different areas of the brain that both are a consequence of one another and they handle two different functions.

What this could imply is the fact that evolutionally – we could experience something (and hence understand it) in one way with logic, but in another way (no less true btw.) with art.

I am an artist. I am no good with logic, although I must be a logical person. But I am not only a logical person - that is my point. Logic is not fundamental to life. Neither is art. Those are peculiar phenomenons that - it seems - are unique to the human kind.

Fitness-Beats-Truth

Here I want to bring into the scene an interesting theorem – the so-called “Fitness-Beats-Truth theorem” or FBT. This theorem, put forward by the cognitive psychologist Donald D Hoffman in his recent book “The Case Against Reality” basically states that – based on evolutionary game theory and empirical study, the probability of really grasping objective reality is practically zero³. In fact, we are no nearer to perceive the truth about the matter than a regular housefly. But for sure a regular housefly perceives its own reality? Yes, but not objective reality – that is the point. It is not fit to see anything beyond what is necessary for her existence. But neither are we, it seems. In fact most of the time I find our attempts to define and understand reality – just a fantasy and games of logic and semantics.

We are apparently hardwired to understand our surroundings (reality) as it is necessary for our survival; just like a housefly!

This is significant, in this context, since it implies that our evolution shaped our experience of our surroundings and our cognitive ability – as not to understand reality, i.e. understand it objectively, but rather

³ Donald Hoffman, *The Case Against Reality: Why Evolution Hid the Truth from Our Eyes* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2019) 144

to experience it and react to it – for the purpose of the survival of our species. In other words, we are adapted by evolution to grasp us and our environment to be fit for evolution – not to understand.

This in turn implies that the evolution of logic might not be the objective phenomenon that is best suited to provide us with an understanding; in fact it might just as well hinder us in our quest for an objective view of the world we live in.

In some ways I find science describing the water perfectly, while I am drowning in it. It is not really grasping the core of the matter - only describing it and practically – in ever more and more obscure ways in a way nobody really understands (quantum theory)⁴.

Science is an obvious consequence of logic and language. But art - as I stated before - is something that I regard as something that triggered the above.

SNART

One of my biggest artistic projects is a body of works I have coined SNART.

It is my intention with my Masters' study to elaborate on the philosophy behind the SNART project and engage in the pursuit of strengthening its theoretical foundation. SNART is an acronym and stands for Self Narrative ART. To be clear: All art is in a sense self narrative - to state the obvious – that is the point. SNART is an attempt to put forward the notion that art is a manifestation of our existence – our individuality; I made this and I was here!

SNART is basically based on the principal thought that art can be regarded as a mirror. Just like literature and historical accounts, can mirror down our past; we can see ourselves in history's hindsight mirror.

The SNART coinage I discovered through a personal hindsight inspection through my art making – a mirroring in a sense, where I could “see” myself in my own artworks.

SNART is the mirror script of the word TRANS.

This is word art:

SNART

TRANS

Languages are written from left to right, right to left and upside down. This interestingly has to do with the fact that we are in fact a composite figure. We have a left side and a right side. We have the left side of our brain and a right side. Those two hemispheres do not equal, but indeed vary. In fact they are two different characters and hold two different world views, as has been shown when patients have had their hemispheres connection cut. If you think about it it is obvious; we are either left handed or right handed. There are two halves of us, like we have merged together. The symmetry here, I deem crucial.

SNART

TRANS

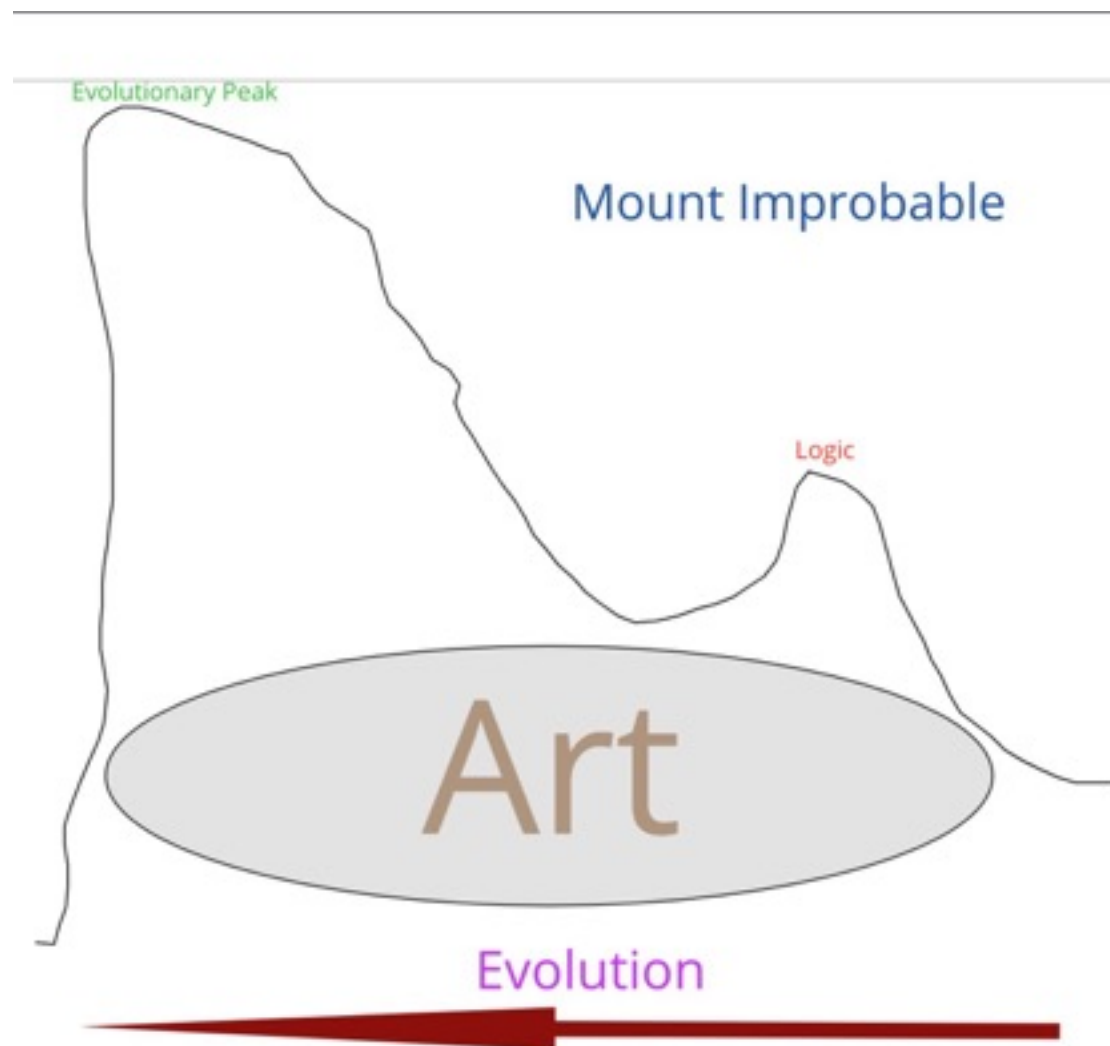
In my art, I work with this idea and use mirroring in every conceivable way – literally and metaphorically. I regard art as a mirror where the artist can “see” the world in a different way and hence acquire a point of view unique.

SNART

TRANS

⁴ “I think I can safely say that nobody really understands quantum mechanics” Richard Feynman. <https://www.cantorsparadise.com/how-to-formulate-a-scientific-theory-1e1d02311433> acc. 12 Jun. 2021.

What I am really saying is that art and artmaking – imaging if you will – is more fundamental than language. More fundamental to the human species than logic. Language and logic is a layer add-on. It is there for a reason, but it might not be directing us towards understanding what is going on. In fact, it could just be limiting our understanding. Perhaps we have evolved sensors and cognitive abilities that are necessary for our species survival, rather than an objective understanding of our universe and reality. To understand, really is not helping us! It might, in fact, be an interference. Donald D uses the analogy of a computer interface. In the aforementioned book he puts forward the useful analogy of using a computer operating system we call a user interface. We can all drag an icon to the trash, open up our browser and send an email. But we can not manipulate the transistors, allocate memory bits or use the binary code to do any of this. Hence, the invention of the operating systems' graphical interface. That surely is useful for its purpose – but that purpose is not to understand the underlying reality – in fact it is there to obscure reality. The main thing is to secure the survival of our species. Hoffman likens our experience of the world around us to a graphical interface, he calls the world – a three dimensional interface.



Art might be downhill Mount Improbable⁵, to quote one of the top evolutionary biologists of our time – Richard Dawkins' analogy of evolution. If we look at his analogy, I suggest we see art as the plateau for the mountain peaks. Logic might be a peak that is a dead end. This time around, in our cognitive evolution, we relied on logic to evolve. That might not, however, be the peak of Mount Improbable we seek, but a minor peak. Dawkins, for sure, claims that there is no downhill climb, when it comes to evolution – just uphill. But, I want to humor the idea that the climb up to a dead end minor peak can fall down again and move on

⁵ Richard Dawkins, *Climbing Mount Improbable* (Penguin Books Limited, 2006)

from the same base. If you think about it; in fact it must be so. Just imagine we are stuck within an evolutionary path that gets us nowhere. This has been the case over and over again in the evolutionary history of numerous species. They usually die out. But life has prevailed! What has accumulated into life today as we know it, is that life, despite encountering numerous faults in evolution, always prevails and adapts. This can be within a species or one species taking over another. Evolution can not stand still – it must evolve, or die.

Perhaps, we the human species, with our mental capacities – can manipulate our own evolution? Perhaps art might play a key role in all of that – I like to think so.

Conclusion

To summarize: I have stated that we have not evolved so as to understand objective reality, but rather to be as fit as possible; and that fact might just as well be a certain hindrance in our objective understanding of the world. I attempted to answer the question: What is art? I put forward the notion that art is connected to image gesture and image making and could be the precursor that catapulted our sophisticated language evolution; as well as a prerequisite to the invention of logic and hence science. I pointed out that language is not merely a communication tool but a phenomenon required for our cognitive and mental capacities. Then I pointed out that just as language – or perhaps even more than language, art can trigger our understanding of our reality, but in a fundamentally different way than logic or empirical study. To illustrate, I pointed out a personal art project, SNART, that enabled me a point of view unique when it comes to personal understanding of my own Self, as well as art and the world in general. I concluded with a bold insinuation that perhaps logic might be a dead end in evolutionary terms and a fundamentally different approach and way of thinking might be needed, if we ever were to really grasp our understanding and our world – and that might be art in its purest fundamental form.

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