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Art, Attention, and Consciousness: An Experiment in Experiential Painting

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Ben Drewry and Johannes Kohler



Ben Drewry

I am currently a Junior Philosophy major at the University of Kentucky. My interests include the interrelationship between art, perception, and creativity, ultimately within a non-dual “framework.”

This article was written for and presented at the “Altered States: transformations of place, performance, and perception” conference in England. (Information about the conference can be found here: <http://www.planetary-collegium.net/conferences/> and the speech that was presented here: http://www.valleysequence.com/text/conference_speech.htm.) The conference took place in the summer of 2005 and was sponsored by the Planetary Colligium, which is an international group of innovative scholars, scientists, and artists working together through a transdisciplinary approach. The founding member, Roy Ascott, is a leading pioneer of interactive and collective art projects using the internet and other forms of modern technology.

One of the Collegium’s main focuses is the study of consciousness through the integration of various modern and esoteric perspectives. That is also what we attempted to do in this article. The writing process was deeply insightful. Through utilizing personal experience, modern scientific knowledge, and esoteric understandings, an expansive perspective was gained of the art process and its relation to perception. The painting experiment itself came from a very simple idea. Without any training or practice of any kind, we created the experiment naturally. It arose from a passion within us, a deeper knowing that we can act and speak out of our own authority. Without the conditioning of formalized patterns of thought, we strove to expand the realm of ‘painting’ and open the art viewer to directly experiencing the creation process.

Presently, I am continuing the attempt to expand the painting process through a combination of traditional and digital mediums. In the future, we would like to animate the process more fully, using digital animation software.

Under the name Valley Sequence, I also produce abstract electronic music that has been featured on WRFL. It correlates closely to the images and can be found on my website, <http://www.ValleySequence.com>, along with other artworks. Anyone who is interested in collaborating may contact me.



Johannes Kohler

I am a Senior Architecture student at the University of Kentucky. My interests include horseback riding and World War II reenacting.

This project helped inform the possibilities I see in my main field of study, architecture. It helped reveal the limitation of specific definitions of application, and that all application arises from the way we perceive the medium in which we are involved. If we operate based upon a limited or conventional perception, it will be reflected and reinforced in the buildings we create and inhabit. Therefore, I see the process of building-making, from initial drawings to “completion,” as an open one to be engaged in directly as it unfolds in the present moment. Buildings may then open us more directly to their living essence as evolving spaces created moment to moment through our perception.

I am looking forward to graduating and working on similar projects, possibly extended into installation type environments.



More images can be seen in the on-line version
of the journal at [www.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/
fall2006](http://www.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/fall2006).



Mentor:
Daniel Breazeale, Ph.D.
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This essay is in part a report on a (filmed) “experiment in experiential painting” and in part an experiment in its own right: an experiment in articulating issues and claims regarding “transformed perception” and the “nature of consciousness itself.” The basic thesis — namely that the experience of creating a certain sort of art indicates the presence of a “prereflective self prior to all perceptual experience” — is surely controversial, but also quite interesting and worthy of further exploration. The authors do a fine job not only of conducting (and filming) their experiment, but also of connecting the results of the same with a large body of literature concerning the relationship between attentiveness and consciousness. The question concerning the “origin of the work of art” is as old as art itself, and these authors are to be congratulated for their fresh approach to the same, an approach that synthesizes empirical research into consciousness, phenomenological accounts of consciousness by various philosophers, and Eastern wisdom literature, and then combines these various theories and accounts with close attention to the actual process of creating abstract painting. What is most original about this paper, as a contribution to aesthetics, is the way it links the experience of “observing” with that of theories of art production and appreciation. The video that was made of the “experiment” described in this paper is also quite illuminating (and the painting itself is — or rather, was — quite beautiful). It is refreshing to encounter such a novel and creative approach to such ancient and difficult issues.

Art, Attention, and Consciousness: An Experiment in Experiential Painting

Abstract: A “transformation of perception” is investigated by looking both at the interrelationship among art, attention, and consciousness and by looking into their common origin. The role attention plays in consciousness is considered. A new model of consciousness is summarized that claims that attention is the primary factor in creating consciousness, and posits a prereflective self prior to all perceptual experience. This model is compared to states of pure consciousness described by Eastern sages, and the role attention plays in achieving those states is examined. Our experiment in experiential painting is described, and we then attempt to tie together the three main topics.

Introduction

Through what process is art created and experienced? What is the nature of looking at the origin of an artwork, not as an object or a thing in itself, but as the entirety of *its* unfolding within consciousness? Could such a looking expose a deeper process that gives light to consciousness itself? Here we will explore the interrelationship between art, attention, and consciousness.

We examine the role attention plays in consciousness. We will take a brief overview of a recent theory of consciousness in which attention plays a primary explanative role. This theory seeks no less than to solve the “hard problem” of consciousness by using a model based on cognitive science and incorporates a prereflective state of consciousness (Chalmers, 1995).

With a wider perspective on the role attention plays both in consciousness and art in general, we will then describe our experiment in experiential painting and highlight some of its experiential qualities.

Through our painting experiment, we hope to grasp intuitively what is involved in the experience of art and to speculate on what this experience can mean for experience and perception in general. It is our view that in order for a “transformation of perception” to take place, one should begin with understanding, or rather intuitively realizing, the origin of perception itself, which upon realizing, allows transformation to emerge.

Attention and Consciousness

The problem of consciousness (at least as far as modern science is concerned) has been an elusive one. The “hard problem” was put forth by Chalmers (1995) as the simple fact that we have conscious experience yet we do not know how to account for it. Materialists give functional or reductive answers, while others simply attempt to prove its insolvability, yet there has been no consensus answer (see Block et al., 1997, for relevant literature).

Varela (1996) called for a new approach when he coined the term “neurophenomenology” to describe a shift in the way consciousness should be studied. He proposed using both a rigorous phenomenological method along with modern cognitive science, related through a system of “mutual constraints,” in order to eventually “dissolve” the hard problem of consciousness. Latter, this shift in epistemological study was declared to be a fundamental shift comparable to that of Darwinism. (Bitbol, 2002)

This method has now laid the groundwork for broad new studies in consciousness. In a recent review, Taylor (2005) proposes that attention is “the gateway to consciousness.” He uses a single control model to map the movement of attention and the model works for both bottom up control (glimmer of light), and top down control (searching for a friend in a crowd). Though these are examples for vision, his model applies to other sensing modalities as well as to motor operations.

Through the execution of his model, working memory buffers are created, and “gaps” emerge within consciousness as content-free experience. He claims that these “gaps” are the result of a prereflective self and lead to the conscious experience of ownership, which is the “error free ‘I’ experience” that is ever present within consciousness.

The ‘I’ experience is best described by Husserl:

When I say *I*, I grasp myself in a simple reflection. But this self-experience [*Selbsterfahrung*] is like every experience [*Erfahrung*], and in particular every perception, a mere directing myself towards something that was already there for me, that was already conscious, but not thematically experienced, not noticed. (Husserl 1973, 492-493)

Therefore, we can only reflect on ourselves. Yet, when we have the experience of pain for instance, we have the continuous feeling that it is our experience. According to Taylor, he solves this problem by introducing a prereflective self, at the center of all perceptual experience, as an integral part of his model of consciousness.

Further, he claims that this prereflective self can be experienced in heightened states of awareness in which the subject “attends his own attention.” He cites studies of subjects meditating that relate both phenomenological observations with data from various types of brain imaging that support the claim of an experience of pure consciousness (prereflective self) during the period of meditation. (Taylor, 2002)

Accounts of pure consciousness have been around for thousands of years as an essential part of many Eastern religious traditions. During the third century before Christ, an Indian sage named Patanjali compiled religious texts called *Yoga S tras*. They consist of short sections guiding one on the inner sections toward pure consciousness. The following is a passage that strikingly resonates with what we have been considering:

... The mind itself is always experienced because it is witnessed by the unchanging Self.

The mind does not shine by its own light. It too is an object, illuminated by the Self.

Not being self-luminous, the mind cannot be aware of its object and itself at the same time.

Nor is the mind illuminated by another more subtle mind, for that would imply the absurdity of an infinite series of minds, and the resulting confusion of memories

... And the mind, despite its countless tendencies, exists for the sake of the Self, because it is dependant upon it. (Patanjali, 18-24)

Further, the *S tras* describes a process of increasing levels of attention from the “gross” level of “mental absorption,” to a state in which “the mind is quiet enough to be absorbed in the object of attention.” In this state, the “object of attention is subtle” and the “range of subtle objects includes all the levels of

creation.” As the light of the Self shines forth, “consciousness perceives only the truth.” Finally, when even the subtlest level of mind is transcended, and the mind becomes perfectly still, the “unbounded Consciousness of the Self – alone remains.” (Pantanjali, 41-51)

Not only is attention a primary factor in creating consciousness, it can also be used in realizing consciousness. For in training ones attention onto attention itself, one may realize a pure consciousness that lies implicit yet unrecognized within all of experience.

If we are to take this extended account of attention and apply it to the “matrix of experience” from which a subject forms a representation, a new ground emerges. It is the ground of prereflective or pure awareness, that lies at the center of experience, providing the “gap” between each attended moment of consciousness.

This consciousness has no object of reflection, thus it is not extended in time and can be viewed as eternal. Being timeless, it completes our vision of the “matrix of experience” in that the vivid aesthetic or spiritual experience eventually reaches a timeless state that simultaneously turns out to be its origin.

Now, if our attending to each “object,” whether of external or internal perception, becomes a more vivid experience as the awareness of time is reduced, are we intuitively glimpsing not only the subtle mental processes at work (recognition of symmetry, color, perspective, etc.), but also the ground of all experiencing itself? What kind of art, if any, could make this “apparent” to one’s self?

Experiential Painting

Hegel claimed that traditional art no longer served the “highest needs of the human spirit.” Although he did not conceive of the non-image abstract art of today in saying so, it could be argued that his philosophical history of art, which leads toward greater abstraction in artistic representation, is a precursor to this modern development. (Pippin, 2002)

While Hegel had in mind a greater reflexivity in the way art is represented, such as paintings about “paintingness,” he could not have imagined the moment in time we are in today in which we have begun to reflect on our aesthetical experience both by rigorous phenomenological methods and by the expanding field of cognitive science.

As Noë (2000, 2002) has pointed out, art can assist us in phenomenological study by engaging ourselves in our perceptual consciousness. He primarily used examples of modern sculpture to propose a theory of engagement in which an “enac-

tive” approach to temporally extended perceptual experience is to be developed. However, it is clear that attention plays a key role in his theory as well: “the painter must attend ... the way the scene looks” (Noë, 2002, his emphasis) and “one must direct ones attention to the temporally extended fully embodied and environmentally situated activity of exploration of the environment.” (Noë, 2000)

He argues against phenomenological introspection by stating, “phenomenological study of experience is not an exercise in introspection, it is an act of attentiveness to what one does in exploring the world” (Noë, 2000). If we are to consider the broad view we took above for the role attention plays in consciousness, the same process would be occurring in attending to a visual scene, attending to the exploration of an environment (a combination of both motor function and sense modalities), and attending to one’s own consciousness (introspection). Although each of these may consist in different “objects” of attention and extend through different parts of the brain, the underlying process would be the same. Therefore, we will accept his view of phenomenological study as one of temporarily extended events, but we will also inquire into introspection, as it is our purpose here to probe the phenomenological aspects of art to see if it can lead to a greater awareness not only of temporally extended phenomenological experience, but of consciousness itself.

The works of Jackson Pollock are a continuing source of inspiration for us, as well as those of Wassily Kandinsky. The painting mentioned here was produced for an art history class assignment to make a painting by “mimicking” his style. This is the only previous painting experience we have had prior to making our experiential paintings. Although we did not maintain Pollock’s dynamic “action painting” in our latter works, his understanding of the use of paint has continued to influence us. We use paint in a process of layering which is akin to creating a thin sculpture, with a wide range of color, on a flat plane (all painting to some extent can be seen as such, although our work makes it explicit). Therefore, although some techniques may be learned and repeated, any constraint in the way we use paint is unnecessary, as we are manipulating it in any way possible to form a type of structure. We will continue to use “we” or “one of us” in regard to our artwork in order to continue the narrative, however it will be noted here that the paintings and music were created by Ben Drewry, and the filming and editing was produced by Johannes Kohler.

The idea for our experiment began with a reflection. While in the process of painting an abstract

painting similar to that of Jackson Pollock, the entire process was observed and we found it difficult to designate a point when the painting was finished. More importantly, upon paying close attention to the process, we noticed that the painting seemed to contain more meaning in its entirety as it unfolded in time rather than what was “left over” when it was deemed complete.

Reflecting on this observation, we decided to film the painting process. We used two digital cameras, one on a tripod, the other hand held, to capture dynamic shots of the painting. No reference points were filmed (i.e., frame of the painting, hand, or brush), because we wanted to capture only the painting itself.

One of us would paint a portion, and then the other would film it at different angles with various dynamic movements. We would then repeat the process, stopping to film about every fifteen minutes. After repeating this a dozen times or so, we concluded by tearing the painting apart, setting it on fire, and filming it as it burned. The film was then edited and self-produced electronic music was thematically added.

In the experience of creating our experiment, there was no “outcome” of representation in our minds. While paying attention to the fact that each “step” of the painting was going to be filmed, every use of paint was a fully present movement, in and for itself. Our minds were fully concentrated on the present moment, for the present moment was what was being recorded.

What eventually emerged was a detailed abstract structure with apparent symmetries and correlations of color. The emergent patterns could be viewed as a generative order explicating the implicate orders of our minds (Bohm, 1980). Bohm and Peat (1987) describe the process of painting beginning with a “general idea, a feeling that contains, in a tacit or enfolded way, the whole essence of the final work.”

Yet, whatever emergent structure or pattern came to life, it was only in the background of our attention, as we were focused not on the development of form, but on attending to each moment.

Such attention demanded an inward looking that could penetrate the layers of self, for the temporal functions of the mind only extended and diluted the present moment that we were attempting to represent. This is not to claim that such functioning did not exist at the time, or that it did not affect the painting, but it only existed as a residual experience “outlining” the greater movement of the present moment.

With this attention, the actual physical activity of painting became effortless. The separation between

the painting and ourselves was fully penetrated, as the expanded space of mind enveloped the entire process.

Now what remains of it? Dispersed ashes of paper, and bits of information are all that are left. However, we should not focus our attention on these remains, but rather the experience of viewing the unfolding of the painting within consciousness as the images are received from a viewing screen. This can only be experienced fully in that from which it came, the present moment.

One may simply perceive it as moving images on a television screen, or look at it is an interesting array of colors and patterns that please the eye. Some could label it as some kind of new form of abstract art, pick out some features that appeal to them, attempt to analyze or ignore the rest, and be done with it.

However, without deeply attending to the experience, not only as visual information received from the screen, but as the entirety of the unfolding process within one’s consciousness, one may be entertained or inwardly satisfied, but no “transformation of perception” will occur.

Let us take a look for a moment at the beginning, middle and end of the experience. From a blank screen, an image materializes and the experience begins. Sound waves vibrate through the atmosphere of the viewing space, drawing one in to pay attention to all the vibrations around her or him.

The middle is the “flow” of the film, bringing the painting to life, not as a linear series of images, but as an amorphous entity within consciousness in which the “observer,” between the images and sounds, the screen and the eyes, even the space between each photon and sound wave, exists as Pure Consciousness.

In the end, the sound is compressed into a single tone and fades away, the screen fades to black, and the “observer” is left with nothing but the inner workings of his or her own mind.

Conclusion

It is not our purpose here to create a hierarchical definition of art or to somehow classify art purely by the transformative experience it may produce. Art is inherently indefinable and the range of meanings that it generates is endless. One needs only to look at the cultural and developmental necessities of all varieties of art, and representations of consciousness in general, to appreciate its various forms. No doubt, it is by fulfilling these necessities that we are able to communicate the broad range of our shared experience.

Throughout history, humanity has used particular forms to represent the entire spectrum of conscious

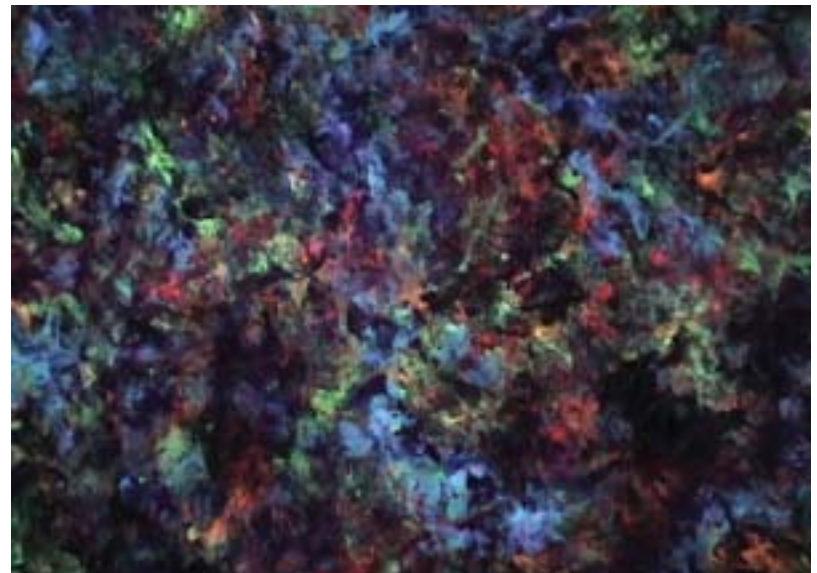
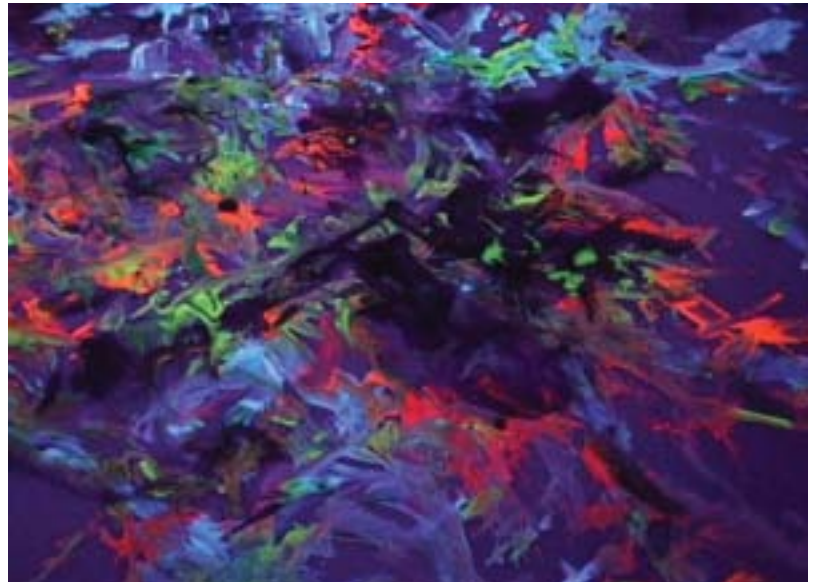
experience. Some forms of art correlated to the emerging understanding generated from human's inherent and expanding ability to reflect. Often, these forms of art reflected in abstract ways an understanding of our world just prior to similar understandings based on science. (See Shlain (1991) for examples)

Now, we are in a time when our understanding has delved into the depths of quantum reality and expanded outward to chart the vastness of our Universe. The greatest temporally extended event conceivable, the beginning of our Universe, in which the forces of nature were undivided, is theoretically reflected upon and "observed" through the use of high speed atom colliders. With such knowledge, there have even been so called "Theories of Everything" proposed that are awaiting the missing observations and concepts that will make them complete.

Theories of consciousness are emerging that may one day create fully working models of consciousness that could even be used to create artificially intelligent computers. The interest and human effort in which both our outer and inner realms are reflected on increases as our perceptive capabilities through the use of instruments expands exponentially.

Suppose these theories come to light. What is art to be when both the Universe and our minds are fully understood and predictable? Clearly, to contact once again the unknown through an experience that transcends our conceptions, art must look to the origin. That is what we have proposed here and have attempted to manifest through our experiment in painting.

The realization may emerge that no matter what one directs her or his attention to whether it be a "Theory of Everything" or a work of art, one is continuing a processes of becoming that has removed one's self from the inner Self or State of Pure Consciousness. This State is one in which the "matrix of experience" is fully penetrated and truly unitary perception comes to life as the subject-object duality is transcended, leaving That perceiving That. Inner time ends as the Source contacts itself in a spontaneous Recognition of Self.

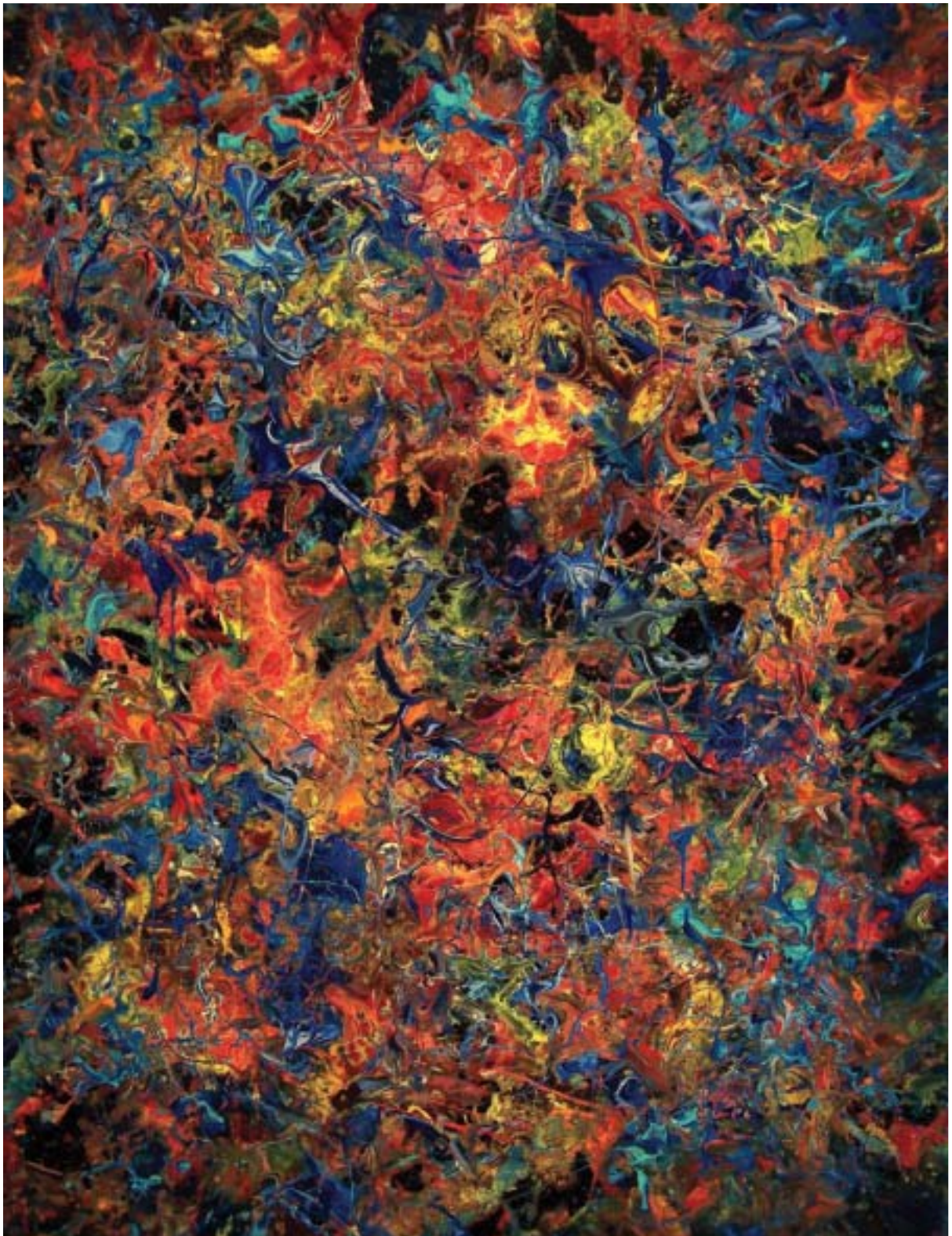


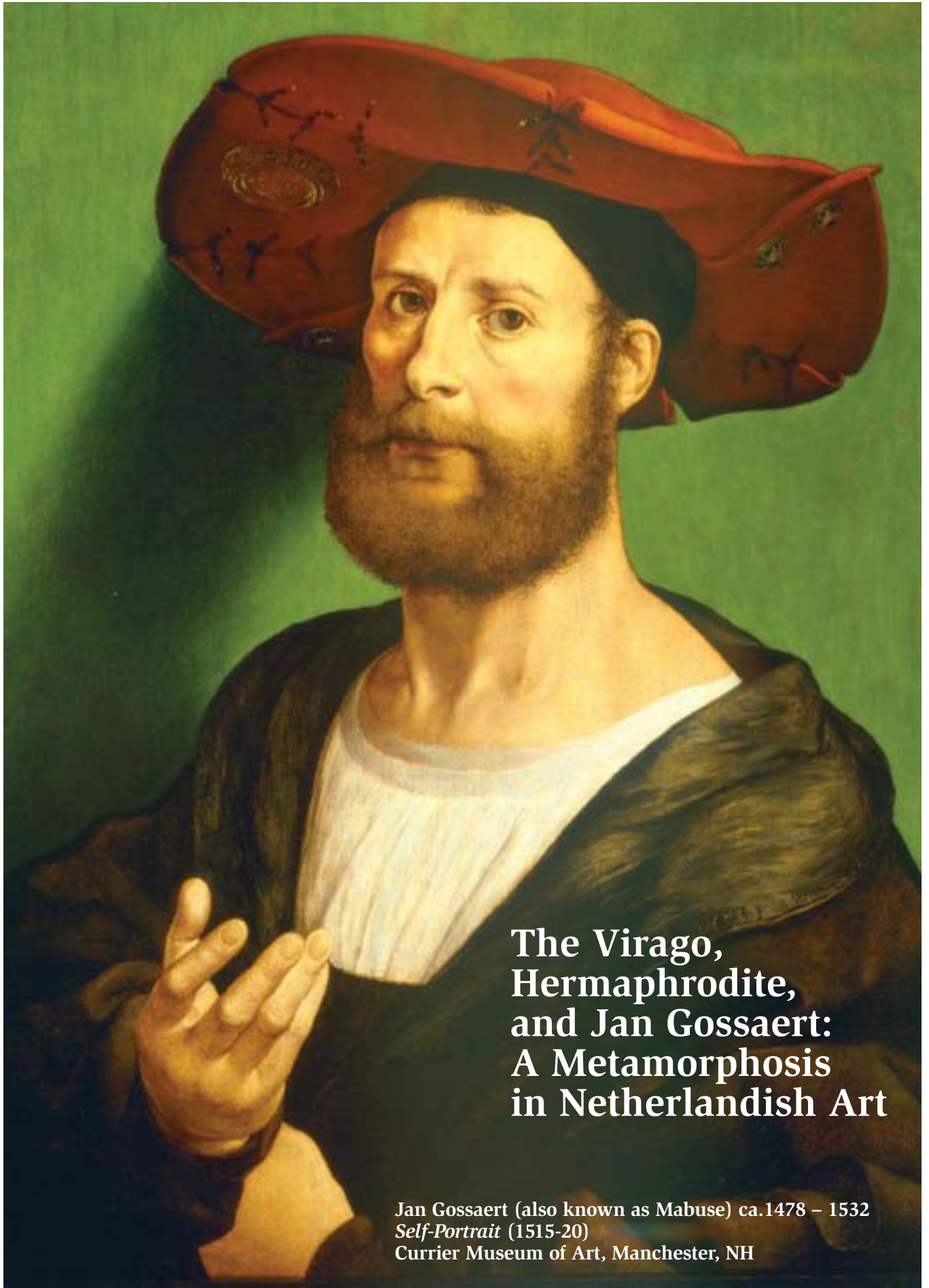
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**The Virago,
Hermaphrodite,
and Jan Gossaert:
A Metamorphosis
in Netherlandish Art**

Jan Gossaert (also known as Mabuse) ca.1478 – 1532
Self-Portrait (1515-20)
Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, NH



The Metamorphosis of Hermaphroditus and the Nymph Salmacis
The Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Netherlands

Artist: Jan Gossaert, 1516