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About Art

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Baruch Blich, "About Art"

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Abstract: In his article, "About Art," Baruch Blich investigates why is art -- and especially modern art -- so difficult to understand? Why do art objects raise questions as to their status? Why scrutinizing art involves semiotics, philosophy of language, linguistics, epistemology, ontology, and even metaphysics? Why art is interpreted by psychoanalysis as well as by behaviorism and psychology of perception? What anthropology and sociology have to do with art and why do we witness art debated in the courtroom concerning copyright issues? In short -- what makes art a crossroad for many and sometimes conflicting disciplines? Is there something in art which compels us to tune our commonsense reactions differently? The answer to these queries, and many others, can be squeezed into one word -- "aboutness": art's reference to reality is constituted on conventions far out from the commonly accepted rules of thumb. The purpose of the paper is, therefore, to shed light on the use of mimesis, representation, depiction, and by the same token explicate why their use in the context of art bear special and unique meanings.

Baruch BLICH**About Art**

I begin my paper with questions which serve us as a guideline to my main subject, i.e.: How do we understand the phenomenon of representation in art? By postulating such a question I venture to say that art, and I refer especially to what is labeled as "modern art," is not only an aesthetic medium, but is mostly a cognitive discipline compelling us to use tools developed by other disciplines in order to understand it.

Why, then, is art so difficult to understand? Why do art objects raise questions as to their status? Why scrutinizing art involve semiotics, philosophy of language, linguistics, epistemology, ontology and even metaphysics? Why art is interpreted by psychoanalysis as well as by other fields of psychology such as behaviorism, perception and experimental psychology? What do anthropology and sociology have to do with art and why do we witness art debated in the courtroom concerning copyright issues? In short -- what makes art a crossroad for many and sometimes conflicting disciplines? Is there something in art which compels us to tune our commonsense reactions differently? Is there a secret in art one is requested to decipher to be able to grasp its essence? Indeed, we can enumerate an endless list of questions, all of them refer to the unique relations art establishes with reality. The answer to these queries and many others, can be squeezed into one word - "aboutness": art's reference to reality is constituted on conventions far out from the common accepted rules of thumb. And although art reflects reality and is about our daily and often dreary business with life, its denotative aspects are different and sometimes even in contradiction in many respects to their colloquial use in other domains.

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to shed light on some of these questions and I will do it by explicating the use of mimesis, representation, depiction, with the intention to show that their use in the context of art bear special and unique meanings. To do so, I begin with two examples which to my mind clearly demonstrate the gap between our ordinary reactions to reality as compared to our reactions to art. It is generally assumed that the pleasure derived from a play depends upon the audience's ability to enter the illusion it offers. A good play presents events whose fidelity to reality is unquestioned. The scene where Othello strangles Desdemona will be taken as convincing if the actors portray it so as to create the illusion that a true event is taking place. But when we come to consider the audience's reaction to the scene on the stage, we must explain why it is that they do not storm the stage in order to separate the adversaries and save Desdemona. One straightforward explanation for inhibiting one's sense of justice might be that people of modern cities are too alienated from one another to butt into another's business. Another explanation and more plausible one would be that though the scene is realistic and calls for active, remedial intervention, the audience is aware that it is only theater and on the stage of the theater we do not see real scenes but only as if real scenes. In other words, we the audience in the theater, in the cinema and in exhibitions of paintings and sculptures (not to mention ready-made-art), are conditioned to inhibit our sense of realism we constantly use while interacting with reality for the sake of "as if" realism and illusion.

The question, therefore, is how do we learn to react differently in the context of art, and sometimes even in diametric opposition to our norms of society, and the second problem we are faced with is who is our teacher; who instructs us the merits of illusion and where this kind of education is taking place enabling us to grasp the difference between what is seen on the stage from what we experience out there in the street. Would we want to say that reality is our teacher, evidence is our school, or would we say that we learn about fictional scenes from fiction itself and by conforming to the principles of illusion? To make a long question short, my intention is to point at the apparent discrepancy between the means and ends of reality vis-à-vis the means and ends of art, and maintain that interpreting artistic illusion is much more complicated as well as sophisticated than our intuitive interpretation of reality. But before trying to give you an answer allow me to sharpen the idea I intend to present with another case. My second example is still in the theater but instead of a fictional occurrence taking place on the stage let us examine a case when the outside world, reality, intervenes with the "as if" reality represented in the theater. I refer to Donald

Davidson's following example: "An actor is acting a scene in which there is supposed to be a fire. It is his role to imitate as persuasively as he can a man who is trying to warn others of a fire. "Fire!" he screams. And perhaps he adds, "I mean it! Look at the smoke!," etc. And now a real fire breaks out, and the actor tries vainly to warn the real audience. "Fire!" he screams, "I mean it! Look at the smoke!," etc. (Davidson, 270). To be able to warn truly his audience the actor is supposedly required to use another language, language of reality; a language whose rules of referring are constituted by a different language game.

In other words, our actor standing on the stage and facing a real fire behind the audience's seats is expected to switch his/her language game and use a language appropriate for a true warning as compared to the language he uses while reciting the text of the play. Obviously, our actor is helpless as there is no special language to denote reality other than the given language he uses while denoting the fictional fire in the play. And yet, it is clear that our reactions towards what is represented on the stage should be of a different kind than our reactions towards reality even though the stimuli we are faced with are of the same appearance.

Would we say that what makes the scenes on the stage different than the same scenes in reality is the context of the scenes? That a fictional scene is due only to various environmental factors such as the building in which the theater is located, the fairly strict rules of dress in the theater, the presence of a staff of ushers waiting to show us our seats, the customs of dimming the lights and raising a curtain? etc., etc.

Are all these elements responsible for switching from one language game to another, for interpreting an action as an "as if" action and not as a real action? Or should we search for an answer somewhere else? Now, I do not deny that we frequently interpret signs (art objects as well as realistic phenomena) in relation to their context, but I believe that identifying a context and being able to adhere to its rules, is not a simple matter and it requires the operation of a special cognitive faculty, a certain state of mind, an ability to screen the context we experience in relation to other contexts we conform to. In other words, a necessary condition for interpreting a sign is by identifying its context; Marcel Duchamp's fountain is interpreted as a work of art because it is placed in a museum which defines its status as such. However, the context (i.e., the museum, the theater, the cinema, etc.), although it is necessary for interpreting the signs it exhibits and its existence is crucial for the tuning of our reactions accordingly, the context as such is not a sufficient condition for identifying the aboutness of art and for grasping its denotative content.

To make myself clear let me concentrate a bit further on the logic of pictorial representations. A portrait showing a bearded man conveys to a normal observer on the customary interpretation the property of being bearded, but the painting certainly does not itself possess the property of being bearded. Conversely, it possesses the property of being covered with paint, but does not convey this property in its symbolic function -- does not tell the viewer that the man depicted is covered with paint. A picture is no doubt an enigma. It is considered the most common and most readily perceived means of communication, but as soon as we try to explain the reality it stands for, it becomes clear that unusual perceptual processes are involved. This polarity between the immediate automatic apprehension of the content represented by pictures, and the difficulty in explicating it, stems from the fact that pictorial representation is an extremely strange creature. On the one hand, its relations with reality are denotative, as is generally accepted for all representational systems. Being denotative, it reflects and frequently also preserves reality and serves as a convenient channel for the acquisition of knowledge, the shaping of public opinion, advertising, education, etc. On the other hand, pictorial representation raises the complex issue of understanding the visual perception of objects appearing in a picture; an issue that puts the normal channels of perception vis-à-vis problems that oblige us to classify pictures as a unique mediator. This equivocal understanding of pictures stems mainly from our dilemmas on how we are to treat the 'aboutness' of pictures.

While pictures are made of paper, canvas, covered with paints, dots and lines, all to be perceived on their own merit, they are also, after all, vehicles of representation, in which we are presumed to identify other objects, and whose value we determine according to established similarities between the said smears and the reality they bring to life. The same goes with an action tak-

ing place on the theater's stage. The strangling of Desdemona is related to what we know or believe is a true strangling of a helpless woman in reality, and yet the difference is that a real strangling possesses the properties of this very action, whereas the "as if" strangling represents the real action by exhibiting different properties which we as an audience should be able to identify.

To take another medium -- language, we can put it, as John Searle has nicely phrased it, "in the form of a paradox: how can it be both the case that words and other elements in a fictional story have their ordinary meanings and yet the rules that attach to those words and other elements to determine their meanings are not complied with: how can it be the case in 'Little Red Riding Hood' both that 'red' means red and yet that the rules correlating 'red' with red are not in force?" (319). It is, therefore, crucial for us -- consumers of art -- to be able to identify art's aboutness, that is, the means with which art represents reality and the inner intricate artistic manipulations by which the artist transfers the real and the true into fictive string of signs.

How, then, we come to terms with what Searle eloquently described as a paradox, and is there away to comply with the paradox. As you can expect, there is no a straightforward answer to the problem, and yet it seems that my question bothered a number of art historians like Gombrich (1972), psychologists like Gregory (1970), and Asch (1969), anthropologists like Segall, Campbell and Herskovits (1966), as well as philosophers since ancient times. All of them share one basic assumption, which was put forward by Kant. In his *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), in the beginning of the preface to the second "Introduction," Kant distinguished between knowledge and belief: "I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith" (29). At a first glance one cannot believe one's eyes: Kant who is renowned as the philosopher of knowledge, advocates for the merits of faith and belief; however, reading the whole chapter written by Kant back in 1781, we would find he advocated for belief only in those cases where what is debated transcends our knowledge, such as *das Ding an sich* (the thing in itself, that is, the rules of nature, the order of the cosmos, etc.), free will of moral judgment, and those aspects of mental behavior which are not subject to experience.

It would not be incorrect to say that since Kant there were no major changes in these concepts -- between "I know that" and "I believe that"; between the knowledge that tomorrow it will rain -- an action supported by evidence and facts, and the belief that tomorrow it will rain -- an action based on intuition or luck. And yet, when we come to consider a problem close to the issue we discuss here, a problem raised by the British philosopher G.E. Moore (1959), it is interesting to note that knowing something and believing in something are two interwoven actions one cannot without each other. I will not raise Moore's question in detail here, I will only suggest that he was concerned with the conditions of reality and in order to test it he asked how do we know we do not dream. To answer this question, Moore had distinguished between the arguments given to support the evidence of reality, from the arguments we supply when asked how do we come to know that the evidence we support our knowledge is true. As to the first problem, which has to do with the evidence of reality, Moore simply stretches his arms and kicks his table, saying that he is positive about these actions. When asked to justify his conclusion as to the evidence of reality, here he said that he can rely only on his belief that the rival interpretation, that is, we dream reality and what we see around us is untrue -- that assumption would face us with a much more complicated understanding of reality than the straightforward interpretation that what we experience is true. In other words, Moore has shown that we do not rely only on our knowledge, but we need to utilize our belief that the frame of reference in which we operate our knowledge is evidently true.

Another and no less persuasive demonstration of the knowledge-belief duality was put forward in S.E. Asch's series of experiments on the "Effects of group pressure upon the modification and distortion of judgments" (1969). It is an experiment which was later replicated in many other experiments and that has become a classic demonstration in social psychology for creating an environment detached from reality, within which a naive subject is required simply to evaluate the lengths of a line in comparison to three given lines. The other eight subjects in the experiment who secretly collaborate with the experimenter precede the naive subject in their evaluation of the length of the line, and they intentionally evaluate it wrongly, far from the normal approximation of its length. As a result of the group pressure, our naive subject joins the group's evaluation, alt-

though the line he/she is supposed to evaluate is demonstratively different than the other three. If we apply this experiment to our case in art, we can understand why I claim that learning to respond to a context cannot be apprehended from reality, but only from the context we are involved in. The same goes with the perception of visual illusions, such as the convergence of railways etc. We, the consumers of art, being exposed to an "as if" reality by the arts, react similar to the above naive subject. We do not compare what we see with real phenomena, or with what we know from reality. Instead we, as experienced consumers of art, having knowledge as to the history of art, evaluate a particular piece of art with established conventions we have knowledge of.

It was Saul Kripke (1980), who has convincingly demonstrated that Frege's theory of meaning which relies on reality is unworkable. His proposal takes another route and he prefers to use reference as a kind of a "chain of communication," or as a genetic connection between singular terms and their respective referents, even the deeds and the properties that are related to them turn out to be false. As a result of turning our attention to the history of the referent or to its genetic ties with its name, the naming relation does not depend any more on any essential properties of the referent expressed by the name. In other words, we can go on using a name given to a referent, even if we are told that the properties related to it are false. For example, would it occur to us to use a different name to Moses the moment the deeds related to him in the Biblical stories turn out to be false, or to have been carried out by someone else; would he no more be Moses for us?

Denying denotation its reference to reality was advocated also by Wittgenstein who coined the term "family resemblance" as an answer to the question what is a language. His intention was to demonstrate that in spite of the great variety of language games, there nevertheless exists a criss-cross of mutual properties by which those totally dissimilar language games are all rightly considered as language. What is attractive in Wittgenstein's terms is that he attaches to the dissimilarities of language games a role no less important than their similarities. With this he turns language into an open system, to which one can annex an endless number of language games. In view of Wittgenstein's theory of language we can easily explain, each of us in his own natural language, the phenomenon of metaphors and other figurative speech including slang. Metaphors and slang do not necessarily demand a straightforward comparison with their literal meaning, or with any reference to the world. We use metaphors, and acquire their meanings, in the frame of the language we use, and by doing it we extend its game. If we agree or at least accept part of what I propose, namely that we can not learn about signs but from the system of signs itself, that language acquisition take place within the game of the language we learn, it should be clear why I am convinced that conforming to the aboutness of art does not necessarily rely on a natural connection between what we experience while interacting with art objects, and what we are exposed to in reality.

The questions I raise at the beginning of the paper as to the involvement of so many disciplines in the understanding of art, are evidence to the fact that art's reference to reality, is and will be in question. It is not easy to put on the operating table smears, dots, and patches of color and debate their resemblance to reality, unless we know to decode their inner and intricate structures. The same goes with theater -- the play is about a murder, but is it indeed about a murder or should we say that the play is about the performance of a murder. One cannot settle down these problems in one short paper, yet I hope I raised questions we all thought of but did not dare to ask.

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Author's profile: Baruch Blich has taught in the departments of Philosophy and Cinema Studies at Tel Aviv University since 1988 as well as at other universities and academic schools such as Camera Obscura. Blich's interests and publications are in the fields of art, photography, media studies, and cinema and he has published articles such as "Pictorial Realism" in *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 9.2 (1991), "Natural Kinds as a Kind of Family resemblance" in the *Proceedings of the 12th International Wittgenstein Symposium* 15 (1988), and "Pictorial Representation and Its Cognitive Status" in *Visual Arts Research* 15.1 (1989). In 1989 he was a visiting scholar to the Warburg Institute in London University and worked together with Roger Scruton and Sir E. Gombrich. At present Blich is lecturer with the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, a senior lecturer in The School of Communication annexed to the College of Economics and Administration and with the Levinski College of Education (all Jerusalem). In the last five years he has lectured in the Van Leer Institute (Jerusalem), in the School of Architecture (Haifa), at the Hebrew University School of Communication (Jerusalem), and has presented papers at various conferences in Prague, Berlin, New York, Vevey, etc. He was for several years the art critic for the newspaper *Hair* (Tel-Aviv). E-mail: <baruch@mofet.macam.ac.il>.