

EXPLORATIONS, STRUCTURES, OBSERVATIONS, ANALYSES, CANONS: WHO CAN SAY THAT CONTEMPORARY ART IS ALL ABOUT UNCHECKED FREEDOMS?

by

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ABSTRACT

The article will analyze the artistic practice of two artists –Jane Prophet and Paul Catanese– within the context of contemporary art at the intersection of new media, science and technology.

The construct that contemporary art is all about unchecked creativity and freedom is an inheritance of romantic ideas that are inspired by the ‘genius’ of creation and are based on the rejection of previous centuries’ aesthetic forms, structures and skills. By retracing the concept of Genius to Kant it is possible to see that in the philosopher’s analysis of the relationship between art and genius, the latter is able to create art because of the **rules** bestowed upon him by Nature.¹

The current “ideological aesthetic conflict”² between David Hockney and Damien Hirst on the modalities of production is a reflection of two opposite approaches where one focuses on skills formed

through canons, structures, observation and repetitions while the other adopts forms of production in the construction of the poetic that are based on post industrial relationships –the artworks are physically done by someone else and the artist limits his contribution to selection and branding of the chosen pieces with his signature.

The exhibition *E-scapes: Artistic Explorations of Nature and Science* at Kasa Gallery, Istanbul, co-curated by myself and Vince Dziekan, presents the work of Prophet and Catanese in this larger context and analyzes two different approaches that are rooted in an artistic practice that reflects canons, methodologies and approaches typical of skill based aesthetics.

KEYWORDS

Curating, contemporary art, new media art, explorations, structures, observations, analyses, canons
E-scapes: Artistic Explorations of Nature and Science is an exhibition

in the physical space of Kasa Gallery that remediates two previous exhibitions that took place in the online exhibition platform of the Leonardo Electronic Almanac in 2010.

Paul Catanese inaugurated the LEA Online Exhibition Platform with his exhibition *Visible from Space* in September 2010. The show was designed as a series of ‘digital artworks and sketches,’ almost an artist’s diary and impression of the world seen from space. Issues related to the landscape, its representation and political structure, mixed with the poetics of its visuality were combined in an enticing sequence of images. Research and development for *Visible from Space* was supported by a month-long residency in June 2010 at the Goldwell Open Air Museum, located outside of Death Valley.

The online exhibition *Explorations of Structure* by Jane Prophet (originally released in October 2010) was conceived in its curatorial remit as a contrasting view to the work of Paul Catanese. In her portfolio of images, Jane Prophet took previously completed art works and re-evaluated them as explorations of structure. Prophet uses innovative media combined with traditional aesthetics to address issues related to the use of scientific methods and technologies in creating art. This can be seen in her use of elements derived from fractal mathematics to the treatment of politics of landscape. She demonstrates through her works, which exist in a variety of forms and contexts, the ability to fascinate the audience with innovative aesthetics.

The process to set up the exhibition in the physical space of Kasa Gallery has provided the opportunity to further reflect on the nature

of the artworks and the creative process of the artists. It still surprises me that many of my students believe that no relation exists between conceptual underpinning, historical references, innovation, originality, skills and the production of the artwork.

The work of both Paul Catanese and Jane Prophet being at the intersection of art, science and technology (and technology is perceived by many of my students as new media technology: e.g. smart phones and tablets, nothing older than ten years) should have been immediate and unmediated. The expectation would be that of an instantaneous production with no research and for immediate gratification.

The reality is that *E-scapes: Artistic Explorations of Nature and Science* is an hymn to canons, observation (both scientific and aesthetic), explorations, structures and rules. In my curatorial analysis to justify the artist’s right to complexity and research I looked at the writing of Gerald James Holton’s *The Advancement of Science, and Its Burdens* and Henry Margenau’s *Open Vistas*.

Holton writes about Einstein and the complex relationship that the scientist had with methodological research, observation and analysis. Faced with the difficulty of constructing theories that could be exactly formulated Einstein, as well as Holton, seek a “judgement into which esthetic considerations and other preferences can enter prominently.”³

Holton’s analysis of Einstein’s methodology is not a rejection of observation, analysis, rule and structure, but more of a statement

in defense of the complexity of scientific analysis and its theoretical formulation. The idea of absolute freedom where 'esthetic considerations and other preferences' can feature prominently is one that is alien to scientific thought and was, in many ways, alien to aesthetic thinking as well. Until the construct that contemporary art is all about unchecked creativity took hold. The concept of absolute artistic freedom from knowledge and rules was inherited by a romantic perception of the creative genius, reinforced by the rebellion of the futurists and consolidated through the postmodern models of factory production (Andy Warhol) and corporate branding (Damien Hirst).

But if we consider the concept of 'genius' as one of a creator that ignores the knowledge of past forms, structures and skills, is this a structure –because even absolute freedom is an operational structure and strategy– that can provide a response to the questions of artistic knowledge and its methodologies?

My aesthetic and philosophical doubts remain. They remain because if the idea of Genius can be traced back to Immanuel Kant the philosopher's construction is very complex. Kant in his analysis of the relationship between art and Genius writes that the latter is able to create art because of the **rule** given to him by Nature.

"The rest of the section argues for the necessity of presupposing a rule for something to be art, and then concludes that it must be 'nature in the individual (and by virtue of the harmony of his faculties)' that is responsible for giving the rule to art –which comes to saying that "fine art is only possible as a product of genius." ⁴

Therefore if fine art is only a realization of the Genius and the Genius receives the rule to make art by Nature, it follows that the

Genius is able to create solely because of the **rule** bestowed onto him by nature.

While I am writing this piece David Hockney has delivered a critique of artists who have no craft, who delegate the making. A poster for his new major solo exhibition at the Royal Academy reads, "All the works here were made by the artist himself, personally." A dig at Damien Hirst? He nods. "It's a little insulting to craftsmen, skillful craftsmen... I used to point out at art school, you can teach the craft, it's the poetry you can't teach. But now they try to teach the poetry and not the craft." ⁵

Hockney favors skills while Hirst seems to favor freedom of production –which although inspired by contemporary models of mass production is a further extension of the freedom of creativity and leaves the artist free from the obligation of implementing the Kantian concept of rule bestowed onto the artist by nature.

This is the reason for my respect for the work of Jane Prophet which although innovative is strongly rooted in a classic tradition of references and contextualizations that do not deprive or suffocate the work but rather enrich it.

The references are not openly flaunted as if searching for a legitimacy –often seen in many derivative artworks that generate artistic phenomena of branding by association. Jane's work is an hard slog, a structured itinerary of explorations that present the viewer with an aesthetic object that is so surprisingly far away from its initial concept that it almost appears totally unrelated. The viewers' observation of the artwork is both an aesthetic enjoyment as well as an exploration of its history, inspiration, meaning and context. It is a journey back to retrace the itinerary of the artist who –through



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scientific and aesthetic observations, critical analysis, corrections and explorations– changes, adapts, molds and at times destroys old structures, canons and frameworks of perceptions, altering the 'traditional views' and suddenly making it so seemingly easy to look at and enjoy artworks that are innovative and simple but borne out of a long process of complex conceptual and historical entanglements.

If I don't argue that there is a part of the viewers' engagement with the artwork that is, and perhaps must be, attributed to taste, certainly there are also canons and traditions that forge the critical structures within which an artwork can be viewed and experienced.

The contemporary concept of artistic genius –with all of its undeniably positive influence– has also contributed to a culture of freedom that is not just a freedom from the hierarchal structures and the oppressive framework, as the futurists claimed at the beginning of

the 20th century, but has also become a freedom from knowledge itself. A ripping apart, destroying and ignorance of knowledge and skill that at best provide a playground for everything to be art and therefore for nothing to be art.

Both Jane Prophet and Paul Catanese, in their own artistic practices and with different methodologies –the reference to tradition and science in Prophet's case and the search for poetics from science in Catanese's work –structure their images as evocative in opposition to causality and rooting them in reverberation. "In this reverberation, the poetic image will have a sonority of being." The artist "speaks on the threshold of being." ⁶

The *E-scapes* exhibition in its desire to follow the artists in their aesthetic itinerary envisaged the participation of the public –in one of its multiple possible itineraries– as a re-visitation of Henri-Louis

Bergson's concept of dynamic vital impulse. This is an aesthetic itinerary based not just on dynamic impulse but also on the wider contexts of participation and flowing as expressed by Eugene Minkowski's interpretation of Anna Teresa Tymieniecka's analysis of relationships in *Phenomenology and Science*.

After this description it may seem that I have declared my preference for structuralism versus idealism, modernism versus post-modernism, determinism versus indeterminism, textual monolithic interpretation versus multiple extratextual elements.

The reality is that if I were asked to take a stand my response would be that I would prefer to sit. This is because I am not interested in fitting neatly in this camp or that camp, along this ideology versus the other. And if my metaphor may be weak and perhaps a bit too witty, there is a passage by Umberto Eco that I believe conveys the complexity of the interaction of different approaches and methodologies in the creation of the artwork. "What I call open texts are, rather, reducing such as indeterminacy, whereas closed texts, even though aiming at eliciting a sort of 'obedient' cooperation, are in the last analysis randomly open to every pragmatic accident."⁷ It is the equivalent of saying that not always labels and ideological constructs do encompass all explanations and do not always deliver what it is expected of them.

The artworks of Jane Prophet and Paul Catanese although constructed with rigorous and at times severe attention to the form, also embody the complexity of multiple interpretations and engagements and deliver more than expected. The artworks do not exhaust their fascination in a single journey of discovery, but exist simultaneously through multiple referential paths, despite or perhaps because of the punctilious and scientific structure of their aesthetic. The curatorial approach for the exhibition was structured to showcase the complexity of the artworks –by offering a a dissection of the multiplicity of implications and providing a glimpse into the journeys that these two artists have undertaken. ■

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Paul Guyer, *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 390.
2. David Hockney has denied his critique to be directed at Damien Hirst –but instead to be addressed to contemporary artists who do not skillfully produce their work.
3. Gerald James Holton, *The Advancement of Science, and Its Burdens: With a New Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 44.
4. Paul Guyer, *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 390.
5. Andrew Marr, "David Hockney - An Artist for All Seasons: Britain's Greatest Living Artist Reveals How He Keeps His Mind Young," *Radiotimes*, January 8, 2012, <http://www.radiotimes.com/news/2012-01-08/david-hockney---an-artist-for-all-seasons> (accessed January 10, 2012).
6. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), xvi.
7. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 7.

BIOGRAPHY

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