

# EXPANDED FIELD ART

## The Illusion We Cultivate

Reinvention is intrinsic to art, dependent as it is on interpretation. Art's appearance and function have changed radically through time. As art's properties transform, as its mode and manner of manifestation shift, the novelty of each incarnation beckons us to reevaluate it. No sooner than our understanding of a new iteration consolidates and becomes more familiar, it begins to alter again as we push at its new limits. Art is a manifestation of our ideas and reforms in synchronicity with our own evolution. Art is purposefully and beautifully unstable.

Understanding the history of art as a linear narrative of objective facts has been our habitual predisposition. Like dipping a ladle in a stream, this intrinsically reductive practice isolates and prioritizes a limited selection of specific examples to transform them into stable indicators of broader efforts. These plot points effectively segment and flatten a fluid entity into a series of apparently temporally limited periods that we then refer to as cohesive 'styles'. With this approach, linear progress is easily assumed to be an inviolable aspect of art. But what if we imagine art as less like a road to a car, and more like an ocean to a fish? We would multiply opportunities by exploring its fulsome dimensionality.

Our understanding of art as a causal narrative that unfolds sequentially in time to progress from a naïve state to a sophisticated one locks us into a perspective that prioritizes our current position and devalues a holistic view. We fostered this economical convention for expediency in a time when knowledge was expensive to acquire and ideas slow to spread, but even as we may continue to utilize that tactic we need not do so exclusively. We may free those points from the line on which they are strung and fling them to the sky like stars. From their new perch, we might find new ways to link them, new ways to use them as a guide for a great journey. To effectively make use of this fresh perspective, we must also reevaluate our point in history from which we depart.

**Systematic** and accelerated development is the defining characteristic of our current context. The nineteenth century brightly demarks the beginning of a bell curve of global population growth, coinciding with industrialization. A positive feedback loop between development and growth touched all areas of human endeavor, often radically. After centuries of domination by religion and royalty, the new fulcrum of art's development shifted to industry and technology, fueled by science. In alignment with this new paradigm, it became convention to categorize creative production as three separate streams of specialization: skilled craftsmanship, industrial design, and fine art. While dissection of cultural production into these ranges made it possible to analyze and ameliorate their respective form and function, it also facilitated and fostered a misperception that they operate as a hierarchy of distinct and mutually exclusive pursuits. Divided and isolated, craft became an arcane practice, design a profitable industry, and art a financialized pastime for the elite.

Simultaneously, the advent of photography unbound art's link to mimesis and sent it on a search for fresh relevance where it found succor in industrialization's strategies of analysis, experimentation and specialization. As art turned away from the paradigm of visual representation, the images depicted in paintings began to dematerialize. From Turner's colonial era ships in turbulent nautical seascapes, Monet's London smog, Seurat's pixelated bourgeois scenes, and Picasso's fragmented perspective abstracting the world to an extent just barely recognizable. Now, without need for mimetic representation, what might art look like? Unmoored by science from traditional themes of mythology and religion, what subjects might art explore? Free from both its prior physical and conceptual restraints, artists raced to establish the extent of the new territory available to them. Then, in 1916, the same year that Einstein published his theories of Special and General Relativity, the opening salvo of modern art's decisive turn rang out in Hugo Ball's Dada manifesto, declaring that from this moment, we were starting anew at *less than zero*, with the anti-art of Dada. This new lodestar inexorably shifted art's focus to answering the question "what can art be?" by reevaluating the roles of creation, perception, and interpretation. Art dove lustfully into exploration of the act and process of artmaking itself, as well as the manner and conditions of its presentation.

Born in the midst of the horrors of WWI, Dada was, by design, a public abortion of art's visual fixation by full frontal assault to provoke the catharsis of outrage with transgression and scandal. Dada prescribed a shock to the system for a convulsing world. In the face of the absurd and senseless violence of the most extensive and destructive war known to humanity, Hans Arp laid waste to aesthetic concerns with his collages created by chance - followed in lockstep by Tristan Tzara's word salad poems, pulled piece by piece from a hat. Their compatriot Hans Richter observed that chance "taught us that we were not so firmly rooted in the knowable world as people would have us believe. We felt we were coming into contact with something different, something that surrounded and interpenetrated us just as we overflowed into it." (Dada, Art & Anti-Art P51) In this spirit of the random and absurd, from the shelter of New York, Marcel Duchamp flung forth his infamous icon, "Fountain". Perhaps the most consequential artwork of the twentieth century, it proclaimed a new category of art, christened the "readymade"; art created whole from a found object, by a simple act of choice, or designation.

Thereafter, art continued to foment many decades' worth of new forms, approaches and ideas. The churn bewildered many, indeed instability and lack of cohesion was endemic to the transformation art was undergoing, hungrily living out every previously unthought possibility, now explosively unleashed by the fuel Dada doused on the fire of the burning question "what can art be?" Artists worked relentlessly to reveal every possibility, every permutation. The scope of possibilities only began to narrow at the end of the twentieth century when innovation consisted not of new forms, but of combinations of forms. The drumbeat of *dénouement* echoed in the installations of artists like Ann Hamilton whose environments submerged the viewer in art. The beat then resounded thunderously with the entrance of Productionism, announcing the conceptual exhaustion of possibilities in the most spectacular way.

Productionism embodied a directorial take on art practice. Facilitated by the anti-hegemonic ideals of Post Modern theory, all historical styles and ways of working were effectively rendered equally legitimate. The artist-made, the ready-made, the assistant-made and the fabricated; all equal. The painting, the photograph, the performance; all equal. Their equality allowed them to be integrated. Productionism signaled the culmination of a century of exploration while uniting what we had previously only known as discreet pursuits. This grand finale was as ostentatious and overwrought as one might hope. Its practitioners had personalities and egos to match; Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, Matthew Barney, each raised small fortunes to command an army of fabricators and agents to bring into existence extensive, spectacular, and theatrical works with impossible perfection.

This apotheosis of this raucous and fractured era of experimentation offered no tidy summation that circled back to champion aesthetic indulgences of the corporeal and the physical. Rather, the march had coalesced into a sprawling band with two distinct beats; the physical and the immaterial. While Productionism represented the former, performance art thrived with equivalently extravagant proponents like Marina Abramovic and Orlan. As Productionism basked in gaudy and contrived spectacle, an antithesis thrived alongside it in the form of Relational Aesthetics, whose florid name belied the modest manifestation of Rickert Travena's soup kitchen-like setups. Simply living one's life in public or systematizing social actions as art became a monkish counterpoint to Productionism's monumental baubles of highly technical physical perfection and extravagant episodic festivals of corporeal ostentation.

In the final decades of a century of frantic exploration, the question of "what can art be" had been answered, and its implications developed with help from philosopher and critic Arthur Danto, who was among the very first to understand what was still in the midst of unfolding around him. He realized that "reality defines a limit art can be said to approach - but which it cannot reach on penalty of no longer being art ... one of the great lessons of art in recent times is that ... artworks and real things cannot be told apart by visual inspection alone." (After the End of Art, P71). The profound implication was that art may take any form, provided that it signaled its conditional conceptual status as art by its context in space (location) and time (history). Danto found this answer in Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*. Visually virtually indistinguishable from a found object, *Brillo Box* was shielded by illusion from being undone as art, or "collapsing into reality" as Danto called it. Upon first glance, *Brillo Box* was made to appear 'real', or merely designated as art, but on close inspection revealed itself as a reproduction that relied upon the context of its presentation at the Stable gallery on East 74<sup>th</sup> street in Manhattan in 1964 and its conceptual proximity to the readymade. Warhol teased with - but discreetly rejected - Duchamp's mechanism of 'designation' only to summon its specter.

The essential difference between *Fountain* and *Brillo Box* is temporal; *Brillo Box* exists because *Fountain* did, it is a development upon *Fountain* that distinguishing itself from it. *Brillo Box* = *Fountain+*. Where *Fountain* says 'something real, physically unaltered, can be art', *Brillo Box* says 'yes, because art is an illusion, as is all perception.' A simulacrum can be more powerful than reality because they are both subject to perception. Meaning, function, and purpose are dependent upon context, choice and consensus. Context is everything because perception is

everything. Art is the illusion we cultivate by manipulating perception. This powerful revelation was the work of a hundred years of art, and innumerable minds combined in passionate labor. While this conclusion was being discovered, its heir was in the process of being born.

**In** the midst of the mayhem of the twentieth century unfolding like a windstorm upon the art world, fresh forces emerged in its wake. Disparate agents began probing the possibility of splicing the divided fields of art, craft and design. This new front emerged dyssynchronously across a range of circumstances and actors. From within the art world, artists like Richard Artschwager, Donald Judd, Jessica Stockholder, and Jorge Pardo politely questioned and eroded barriers by entering a dialogue that engaged design. More insistent challenges came from those on the periphery of the art world, most especially from Studio Craft Movement artists like Beatrice Wood, Harvey Littleton and George Nakashima, and conceptual or craft-centric designers like Wharton Esherick and Paul Evans who nibbled eagerly at art's edges.

The early narrative of design-as-art initially revealed itself in tentative ways, like Diego Giacometti's furniture collaborations with his brother Alberto in the 1930's, Lucio Fontana's collaborations with Osvaldo Borsani after WWII, and then more explicitly with the furniture of Wendell Castle and Gary Knox Bennett in America in the 1960's and 70's. It wasn't until the new millennium that this approach found surer footing in rich commercial ground, notably with Simon DePury's innovative and category defining DesignArt auctions, and Larry Gagosian who introduced Marc Newson as one of the first designers to be represented by a major art gallery.

On the heels of Productionism, a toehold was achieved for the traditionally 'craft' aligned materials of glass and ceramics in the upper echelons of the art world. Decades of development and professionalization in university settings had empowered artists working in glass, ceramic and wood. A small but persuasive number of groundbreaking artists laid a solid foundation for a new and emboldened generation; Peter Voulkous, Toshiko Takaezu, David Gihouly, Joel Phillip Myers, Lino Tagliapietra, David Chihuly, to name but a few. Ceramicists in particular found early success breaking into the art world with artists such as Betty Woodman, Ron Nagle, and Viola Frey achieving representation at standard-bearer contemporary art galleries, a development that has broadly metastasized to the point of becoming normalized and unremarkable today. For a subsequent new generation, many of the old barriers had fallen. As if to publicly signal this paradigm change, the Whitney Biennials of 2000 and 2014 respectively included the glass figures of Josiah McElheny's and Sterling Ruby's Oldenburg-esque ceramic ashtray.

These challenges were so diffuse and incremental, their transgressions so fundamental and unconventional that the art world easily isolated or ignored them. What looked to art purists like barbarians at the gate, was in fact the irreverent wave of a fresh avant-garde, thumbing its nose at an increasingly protectionist and siloed contemporary art establishment whose power seemed weaker the farther it traveled down its narrow path.

**We** now stand on the threshold of a new era, born from the Duchampian dream that art can be anything, that art is defined by context and consensus. Our work now is to make use of this knowledge by controlling context and creating consensus. We must *do* more to *activate* art. The question to answer next is simply “What can art do?”

...what artists were to do after the end of art is also difficult to say, but it was at least a possibility that art, too, might be enlisted in the direct service of humanity.

Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art*, P130

History offers precedent: art has been a cudgel to reinforce morality and power, a protector of history and cultural memory, an agent of ideology, and a proponent for philosophical inquiry. Art is powerful when it is situated at the nexus of daily life, in domestic and civic environments where it may foster dialogue. Art is a tool we created to be of service; it is a force whose power is fully realized only when applied to real ends. Our new course demands sacrificing a sacred cow; the expectation that art is a *thing* that looks a certain way. We have already embraced the larger truth that art incorporates many modes of presentation, and in doing so we have learned that art is the illusion we cultivate by manipulating perception when we manufacture context and consensus to designate meaning, function and purpose. How, and to what extent can we apply this illusion broadly to our reality?

Our quest begins in earnest with the establishment of a shared understanding of three essential elements, three words that we requisition, agree to clarify and imbue with purposeful meaning. And what allied trio of slippery words could benefit more from such treatment than *art*, *craft*, and *design*? Together they are commonly used to summon the full range of human creativity expressed through physical matter, yet their individual outlines are so vague and blurry as to threaten to render them meaningless. It is curious that words representing such large and important fields of human endeavor have proven maddeningly resistant to finding broad consensus in their meaning. Until now, this foggy flux has been more a feature than a failing, as the flexibility allowed for experimentation and development. Flexibility fueled growth, but with the increased scale and complexity of these fields, we have now reached a point of diminishing returns. The endeavor is at risk of collapse if we do not take a new tact.

Many people understand art, craft, and design based on a matrix of criteria; materials, processes, aesthetics, and their relationship to physical utility. They are also often defined in relation to each other, in an exclusionary ‘*this is not that*’ sense. For good reason, most people understand art as an object, a painting on canvas or a sculpture from stone. These objects have served diverse cultures worldwide for millennia, recording stories and symbols to preserve them in culture through time. These forms, however, are not the limit of art but merely an opening salvo as we discover exactly how much bigger and more powerful art has the potential to be.

By putting forth rational and purposeful definitions of these three words, grounded in a historical understanding of their function, we can empower ourselves with a strong foundation for our work, so that we may more effectively shape our world.

**CRAFT** is a verb, meaning to skillfully produce or shape something with processes that promote and preserve technique.

**DESIGN** is the practice of creating work that effectively serves a physical function.

**ART** is the manipulation of reality – our perception and interpretation of matter - by the collective transmutation of meaning using a talisman, a symbolic object.

Their commonality is that each one engages our binary physical-conceptual existence in distinct but complimentary ways. Our minds and our hands are restless tools that act in unison as we think and move through a world made of matter. Where craft focuses on process and design on effect, art combines the two by employing craft - the physical manipulation of matter - to create symbolic objects that embody ideas whose interpretation within a given context generates meaning and adds a new and purposeful stratum to our shared understanding of reality. Art engages the uneasy truth that reality is perception - and it demonstrates our control of that perception. With this explicit understanding, we achieve an important new stage in the project we call *art*. It is no longer confined to being embodied in a limited manner of specialized format. Art is set free, and now we may leverage the potential it unleashes.

**Our** tradition, when art slips its old skin and no longer appears as we expect, is to call it Impressionism, Pointillism, Futurism, Cubism, Dada, Surrealism, Action Painting, Color Field, Pop, Happenings, Installation Art, Environmental Art, Performance Art, Productionism, or Relational Aesthetics. This is our historical strategy for growing our schema; by grafting a new branch on to it. In this mold, let us take a cue from Rosalind Krauss' 1979 essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", the goal of which was to contextualize the relationship of the new typology of land-based art to traditional sculpture. Our parallel need today provides a basis to extend Krauss' approach to help us describe this new era's work as *Expanded Field Art*.

Fueled simply by our instinct to push at boundaries, this new era for art signals the conclusion of its developmental phase, having answered the question 'what can art be?', opening us up to a new question that will now drive exploration; what can art do?

#### **Development: What Can Art Be?**

1. Symbolic Representation: of nature, astrology, mythology, religion
2. Representational Realism: mimesis, technology/technique, aesthetics
3. Ideological Representation: analytical, introspective, conceptual, philosophical

#### **Implementation: What Can Art Do?**

1. Engage Actionable Symbolism: Apply Development stage strategies as a means to create new meaning and narratives.
2. Maintain Structural Integrity: Demonstrate coherence of the physical and conceptual through skilled making of symbolic objects.
3. Provide Systemic Stability: Regulate and develop historical continuity of cultural dialogue built on a system of established but evolving principles.

To answer art's new question, the most effective approach is undoubtedly a literal one; concentrating on objects that integrate conceptual and functional roles. Fidelity to the ideals of Expanded Field Art demands the championing of work that embodies respect for function by virtue of skillful manufacture and engagement with technical innovation and material exploration. We must ask for work that is executed with integrity, in service of a narrative that addresses elementary themes of the human condition viewed through the fresh lens of contemporary relevance; *what is this life, and what are we to do with it?*

By merging art with craft and design we can integrate it into life while preserving its special status as desirable and fascinating by the physical appeal of skillful technique and the intellectual appeal of function's implied narrative through purpose. With these combined strategies we extend the reach and potential of art - no longer rarified and distant, but integrated, interactive and engaged. Art must serve us as it did with stained-glass windows of cathedrals, in tapestries that insulated cold stone walls. Our work is to wring as much power and effect as we can from this cultural force that we conjure when we engage in the making and interpreting of symbolic objects, stories and ideas encapsulated in physical form through art.

Expanded Field Art sprang from our acceptance of the now established understanding of Art = Context + Consensus, birthed from Dada's introduction of Anti-Art which spawned a century of experimentation. In these manifold experiments, be it the appointment of the readymade, the subconscious of Surrealism, the subdivision of its physical painterly aspects from Pointillism to Color Field, or the dematerialization of Relational Art, or the spectacle of Productionism, we found the only constant was the need to agree to ascribe this work as art. Indeed, anything we assigned as such, became it, so long as we did it sincerely and cooperatively, building consensus upon precedent in pursuit of a common goal. Even as multitudes of sceptics objected and declared the strange new work null, it only grew stronger and became entrenched in the cannon. Where it became fragile, and started to come undone, was the moment we failed to demonstrate faith in our astounding conceptual discovery that context is everything because perception is everything. We retreated in fear to traditional aesthetics, mimicked past experiments, lost ourselves in insular dialogues, ego, and market-driven work. We have only to embrace the realization that art is the illusion we cultivate by manipulating perception as we manufacture context and consensus to designate meaning, function and purpose. The flame burns brightly still, and waits for those who will carry it forward together, through the new paradigm of Expanded Field Art.

Art does not fear mistakes, only irrelevance.

Damon Crain