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Theories and Observations in the History of Art

A Comment on a Central Issue within the Philosophy of Science

MICHAEL RANTA

During the last few decades, the view that no theory-neutral observations are achievable has gained relatively wide acceptance among philosophers of science and epistemology. Positivist assumptions according to which descriptions of our observations could be cognitively meaningful (i.e. have an empirical truth-value) independently from any theoretical framework presupposed by the observer has come under attack from various sides. Some of the most influential anti-positivist philosophers of science are, for example, Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, and Paul Feyerabend, and within numerous disciplines, not least within the humanities, a strict dichotomy between theory and observation is nowadays regarded as untenable: all observation is accordingly theory-laden. In its most radical versions, this standpoint has led to various forms of cognitive relativism, that is, the view that beliefs and assertions (based upon observations) cannot be justifiable or true in any neutral sense, but unavoidably have to be judged in relation to certain theoretical, historical, sociological, cultural, or even subjective presuppositions.¹ Several cognitive relativist positions can be distinguished depending on which theoretical frameworks for observations have been postulated, and possible candidates in this respect are, for instance, forms of life and language games (the later Wittgenstein), paradigms (Kuhn), conceptual/linguistic schemes or networks (Quine, Derrida) or just different forms of power relations (Nietzsche and, of course, a manifold of scholars working within sociological, Marxist, and feminist frameworks).

Among art historians, similar ideas have also gained adherents, which probably is hardly astonishing due to the discipline's somewhat elusive and methodologically imprecise character. Thus, for example, Norman Bryson has argued for a cognitive relativist position, as have scholars influenced by a feminist approach. It is not my intention to give a detailed account of these views nor the arguments put forward in defence of them; rather, I shall touch upon the relationship between theories and observations within the history of art on a more general level.² A central notion in our discipline is of course "art", and an important question concerns the relevance of theories for demarcating those objects assumed to belong to our field of inquiry. More specifically, I intend to describe and discuss the proposal put forward by Arthur C. Danto regarding the ontological status of "works of art" and the importance of theories for describing and interpreting such works. Moreover, inquiries within the history of art consist to a considerable extent of descriptions and interpretations of objects made in the past, and we may thus ask in which way it is reasonable to talk about observations at all in a field with outspoken historical concerns.

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Is it possible to observe the past, especially the human past? Strictly speaking, all observations are about the past: to perceive an object (or any states of affairs) means that information about the object's conditions at a certain moment of time has been received, i.e. at the moment when an informative (visual, auditory, etc.) signal has

left it. The transmission (and of course the mental processing) of this signal occurs at finite speed and is extended in time, however minimal it may be. This is even more apparent if we consider, for instance, live-transmissions on radio and television, the communication with astronauts in a spacecraft, and - perhaps most obvious - astronomical observations of stars where the distance between observer and object can be measured in millions of light years. In the natural sciences as well as in the historical disciplines past states of affairs are examined, and in this respect there seems to be no epistemically relevant difference between these fields of research.³ It may be argued, though, that historical events cannot be witnessed as straightforwardly as pure physical events; the former are observed indirectly by means of other people's testimonies (quite frequently manifested in written form), testimonies of testimonies, and various kinds of material evidence (such as works of art, architectural remains, and so on). On the other hand, observations within the natural sciences may also be of a quite indirect nature, i.e. in those cases where different kinds of instrumental aids (such as telescopes, microscopes, microphones, etc.) are made use of. Such observations are treated as reliable against a number of theoretical assumptions (which at least in principle can be specified) according to which observations by means of these instruments occur under proper conditions and are not misleading or distorted in any way (e.g. by taking certain optical laws into account). Perhaps the difference between directly and indirectly observable entities is more a matter of degree than a matter of kind, stretching from observations with, for example, the naked eye, spectacles, microscopes to electron microscopes. In extreme cases we may talk about indirect observations of theoretical entities (such as electrons or quarks), the existence and properties of which have been established by means of more direct observations in combination with so-called operational definitions. Such definitions specify those operations, methods, and criteria which the meaning of theoretical terms is based upon, as well as the ontological and epistemic status of

theoretical entities. In other words, we presuppose - explicitly or implicitly - certain observational rules prescribing what should be regarded as reliable (proper) observation conditions (e.g. that the observer is sober, awake, and competent; that there are proper conditions of lighting; that the instrumental aids are not defect; that the stimulusinformation has been transferred to the observer in an acceptable way; that optical or other lawlike regularities exist, and so forth) and reasonable conclusions.

Now, what about historical research, especially in the history of art? Is there anything comparable to scientific observations, theories, and operational definitions? And how should the term "history" be defined at all? Arthur C. Danto, for example, has in his much debated work *Analytical Philosophy of History* (1965) suggested that the following minimal and necessary, though not sufficient, condition applies to history research: "...[H]istorians...try to make true statements, or to give true descriptions, of events in *their* past."⁴ Furthermore, as Danto admits, historians also seek to provide explanations of such events, though at a secondary stage. Quite obviously, this characterization is likewise applicable to the history of art, at least to some extent. It should be noted, though, that during the last few decades a tendency towards a more interdisciplinary approach has become apparent; thus art history's subject matter(s) have been investigated from a number of different angles provided by fields such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, semiotics, marxism, gender studies, philosophical aesthetics, and so on. Moreover, art history has also given metadisciplinary issues considerable attention, thereby attempting to elucidate the field's nature, goals, methodological principles, and prospects (and the NORDIK congress with the title "The Historiography of Art History" obviously bears witness of such self-reflective considerations). In these respects, then, art history exceeds purely historical investigations (in Danto's sense), although historical/archaeological research still seems to dominate (some investigations concerning the history of art history would of course belong to the latter).

However, there is one further important way in which art history research is influenced by transhistorical assumptions, issues, and attitudes and thus goes beyond sheer descriptions of the past. Art historians, as well as historians in general, assume usually, at least implicitly, that humans are characterized by a number of historically stable properties and behavioural dispositions. Such characteristics may consist of certain basic needs (e.g. for self-protection, avoiding pain, maximizing or maintaining states of pleasure, getting food and sex, etc.), fears (e.g. of death, pain, illness, etc.), hopes, emotions, the formation of certain categories, conceptions concerning the efficiency of certain means in relation to desired goals, various kinds of rationality, and perhaps even some forms of social interaction (e.g. between parents and offspring), and so forth. Furthermore, human nature is also regarded as physiologically quite stable, that is, with regard to its nervous system, its sensory organs, and bodily constitution.

It may be admitted that not all such theoretical presuppositions, concerning lawlike regularities of human behaviour or mental activities, can be stated nomothetically and thus fitting into something like Carl-Gustav Hempel's (earliest versions of the) 'Covering Law Model' (according to which all explanations must include one or several general laws). Still, art history can hardly be reduced to pure idiographic research, thus solely describing particular events; instead art history presupposes at least statistically probable regularities with regard to human nature and behavioural dispositions (which also Hempel himself admitted with regard to historical explanations in general).⁵ Now, although we may concede some socio-historical variations regarding such human characteristics and their various manifestations, a radical denial of any kind of stability in this respect would certainly lead to serious problems of incommensurability. How could we if no common denominators are presupposed make comparative investigations of different cultures, or of remote cultures? And how could we then even *identify* remote cultures *qua* cultures, that is, as societies consisting of mentally and behaviour-

ally rational beings which, at least to some minimal extent, have similar characteristics and beliefs as we ourselves have, i.e. the observers? In some respects art history research certainly is, and has to be, based upon premises assumed to be ahistorically valid.

Let us return to the problem of observing the past. First of all, we may reiterate that past events or "facts" obviously cannot be observed as directly as objects, events, or states of affairs which belong to our (seemingly) immediate experience. Indeed, the only straightforward "facts" available to us consist of material remains, written information, and so on. However, such remains may - together with certain theoretical background assumptions - count as evidence that specific events actually have occurred in the past. These assumptions may exist at a very basic level, for example, having to do with beliefs concerning causality, the endurance of material objects over time, that rational human agents (rather than natural forces) might be responsible for the creation of certain objects, that an external world apart from my (the historian's) mind exists, and that the world did not come into existence one minute ago (which is theoretically conceivable; even my personal memory about the past could be an illusion!). Numerous assumptions may of course be far more specific. Thus observers of past events usually presuppose the validity of particular dating procedures, certain criteria for the meaning, reliability, relevance, and interconnectedness of various material sources, that certain cultures with various kinds of characteristics (e.g. technological, economic, religious, ideological, aesthetic) have existed, and so forth. All in all, then, there seems to be a network of theoretical beliefs which, taken together, may justify our historical observations despite the fact that past events are more or less indirectly accessible (i.e. depending on the distance in time, the amount of supporting information, and the way this information has been mediated). Hence assertions concerning the past do not have to be less reliable than some scientific statements which also may refer to rather indirectly observable entities or events. To some extent, as for instance Danto has sug-

gested, historical assertions may probably be regarded as comparable to theoretical terms in natural science.⁶ Statements such as “The Parthenon was constructed between 447 and 432 B.C.” or “Michelangelo created the ceiling frescoes in the Sistine Chapel” are thus analogous to scientific statements such as “Electrons have negative charge”. In both cases we have numerous background theories which direct the interpretation and explanation of our present observations, which provide us with criteria for proper and reliable observation conditions, and which permit us to postulate the existence of various theoretical entities. Yet, we may certainly admit that historians frequently disagree regarding the interpretation, evaluation, and selection of their observations. Furthermore, we should also be aware of narrative and constructive aspects within historical research (which Danto himself has stressed). Still, this does not by any means legitimate any radical scepticism with regard to the credibility of historical observations or claims according to which ‘anything goes’; there are numerous (interpersonally and institutionally fixed) constraints on what should count as reasonable assumptions concerning the past.

A specific problem within the history of art, however, has to do with the demarcation of its field of inquiry. Obviously, each history has to be selective, but the employed principles of selection imply evaluative judgments, which of course sometimes may be regarded as highly controversial and open to discussion. The history of art history is permeated by normative decisions according to which some works of art should be included in a list of historically/aesthetically significant “masterpieces”, while others are given less attention or are even completely ignored. Such value judgements can be based upon various functional or inherent properties which can be ascribed to artworks, such as their assumed capacity to give us knowledge of some kind (e.g. about certain socio-historical situations, the mental state of the creator, existential human conditions, the existence and goodness of God, etc.). Other evaluations can focus upon the work’s degree of realism, its formal properties, the tech-

nical skill of the artist, and even its aesthetic value or beauty (whatever that means). While some objects are judged to be valuable or noteworthy *per se*, still others may be thought of as significant due to their *causal* relevance for the emergence and character of “real” masterpieces. Causal aspects being of interest in this respect might be of e.g. stylistic, semantic, religious, political, or otherwise ideological nature. This kind of approach can, for instance, be illustrated by Erwin Panofsky’s “Early Netherlandish Painting” (from 1953) where something like a stylistic/naturalistic ‘evolution’ has been outlined which stretches from 14th century French and Flemish book illuminations to the works by Robert Campin and, finally, the “masterpieces” by the brothers van Eyck.⁷

It should be noted, however, that although the history of art to a considerable extent is concerned with objects regarded as “art” in a quite narrow sense, its field of inquiry also includes non-artistic “objects” (or at least less clear-cut works of art), such as architecture, city planning, parks, advertising posters, furniture, clothes, handicraft products, and all kinds of household items. The question as to how and in which way(s) these “objects” of inquiry deviate from or overlap with the category “art” (and generally how the category “category” should be analyzed) would certainly deserve a thorough discussion, which unfortunately falls outside the scope of this paper.

Still, I would like to direct your attention to an interesting and much discussed proposal made by Danto concerning the concept of art.⁸ According to Danto, art cannot be defined by referring to its visual or other perceptual qualities, its expressive or depictive functions, and so on. Instead, we have to take certain cultural, social, historical, and - generally speaking - theoretical aspects into account. Danto mentions a number of examples consisting of pairs of visually indistinguishable objects, one of which can be categorized as art, while the other cannot. For instance, an artwork such as Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box* is (almost) perceptually identical with a “mere thing”, that is, a box filled with washing powder that one

could encounter in a supermarket. The decisive difference between these objects is that our perception of them is influenced by certain theoretical presuppositions. Moreover, not everything can function as art at any historical moment; thus Warhol's *Brillo Box* would (and could) not have been classified as art, say, during the Renaissance. We need the framework of art theories in order to make the (ontological!) existence of an artwork *qua* art possible at all. Such theories, which also imply historical knowledge about the development of art and even other art theories, are given expression within a so-called artworld (being logically dependent on theories of art), thus constituting the category "art". There are two essential conditions for something to be an artwork, first, that is a representation (though not necessarily simply a depiction) requiring interpretation, and, second, that it is self-referential. In other words, works of art are about something (e.g. about the external world, the artist's world view, but also about other works of art), they have a meaning, a content. At the same time, they direct our attention to their style, their way of expressing or embodying the content. Generally speaking, art theories function as semantic directions for understanding (and understanding something as) art. Accordingly, our observations of artworks are highly, and essentially, determined by historically variable theoretical presuppositions.

In the present context, it is not my intention to discuss Danto's suggestions in further detail; rather, I wish to stress that numerous "observations" in art history consist of descriptions and interpretations of works of art. These observations, as well as the selection of noteworthy objects, may indeed be assumed to be influenced by theoretical frameworks, for example in the way suggested by Danto. However, serious problems arise if theories are supposed to determine our observations entirely. In that case we would be unable to confirm or reject any theory by referring to their (lack of) compatibility with theory-independent empirical facts or their degree of verisimilitude. The choice between competing theories could certainly not be justified by

appeal to "simple facts" (if the latter are considered to be the result of theoretical frameworks). And how could we decide between incompatible observations which both seem to be congruent with the prevailing theories? Is the very idea of incompatible observations intelligible at all if the same theoretical frameworks are supposed to determine them? Indeed, an exaggerated emphasis on the role of theories in relation to observations in art history research seems to lead to a cognitive relativist deadlock - with all the problems which generally affect relativist positions. For example, it has frequently been remarked that radical relativist views are self-contradictory or self-refuting: the generality of cognitive relativism must lead to the conclusion that this position itself is only relatively true. Moreover, any claims according to which certain theories and observations should be accepted or dismissed could hardly be given any kind of rational justification.⁹ In fact, I believe that art history research needs to be based upon observations, treated as stable empirical facts, in order to justify its status as a rational endeavour. Even its harshest relativist critics presuppose certain "empirical facts" when they claim that beliefs and evaluations related to art *de facto* vary or have varied under different historical or social circumstances. The general point I would like to make in this paper is that some kind of theory-independent "empirically naive" approaches in our discipline may be justified, and perhaps even are unavoidable.

With regard to the concept of art, we may admit that it to a considerable extent is related to theoretical and institutional frameworks; still, it would be rather futile to deny the existence of art, or of objects and activities similar to art, in remote cultures which have no notions comparable to "art", nor any (explicit) art theories or institutions. As Monroe C. Beardsley once put it, in a critical comment directed against Danto's view on art, "...Danto must be mistaken in his well-known view that it is theories that make art 'possible'. Danto says, 'It would, I should think, never have occurred to the painters of Lascaux that they were producing *art* on those walls. Not unless there were neolithic aestheticians.' Per-

haps so; but it does not follow that they were not producing art. An art theory may make the *concept* of art possible, but that's not the same as making *art* possible. Unless there were neolithic microbiologists, it would not have occurred to the cave dwellers that their illnesses were caused by micro-organisms; nevertheless they died from them."¹⁰ Now, if Beardsley's assumption is correct, an important task is to investigate which functional, semantic, emotional, or perceptual properties such objects or activities have which seem to overlap with works falling under the concept of art, according to our present conceptions. Investigations on these lines could be carried out from a number of *empirical* angles, such as those provided by psychology, neurophysiology, anthropology, and so on. A thorough discussion of such observations and theories would probably be fruitful, but - unfortunately - go beyond the questions at issue in this paper.

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Notes

1. Subjective relativism (according to which notions such as truth or knowledge should be related to particular individuals, with their private biases, interests, or beliefs) is of course a possible form of relativism, though less frequent than intersubjective versions. For an excellent discussion of different types of cognitive - and moral - relativism, see J.W. Meiland & M. Krausz, *Relativism - Cognitive and Moral*, Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982; R. Harré & M. Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, Oxford/ Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.
2. For a more detailed account and criticism of Bryson's view, see M. Ranta, "Brysons relativism och kritik av konstvetenskapen", in *Symposium om konstvetenskapen - Vi granskar oss själva och vår verksamhet*, Konstvetenskapliga institutionens skriftserie Nr. 3, Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 1997.
3. For an interesting discussion on these lines, see P. Kosso, "Observation of the Past", *History and Theory - Studies in the Philosophy of History*, vol. 31, pp. 21 - 36, 1992.
4. A.C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, (1965) 1968; p. 25.
5. See C.G. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History", *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 39, 1942 and especially "Deductive-nomological vs. Statistical Explanation", in H. Feigl & G. Maxwell (eds.), *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science (III)*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962; "Explanation in Science and History", in W. Dray (ed.), *Philosophical Analysis and History*, New York: Harper and Row, 1962/66.
6. Op.cit. pp. 78 - 80.
7. E. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting - Its Origins and Character*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953.
8. See e.g. A.C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace - A Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981; *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
9. Cf. the discussions in the works mentioned in note 1.
10. M.C. Beardsley, *The Aesthetic Point of View* (eds. M. Wreen & D. Callen), Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, p. 308, 1982.

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