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The Journal John Carvalho's Thinking with Images, An Enactivist **Call For Papers Aesthetics**

Abstract

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suggestion that the thinking presented in each chapter is skillful is not explained. Second, the book does not just focus on thinking when we don't know what to think, it also claims that such thinking frees us from mere looking. But enactivism does not require us to deny that our engagement with particular works in their 'concrete singularity,' to use Carvalho's term, is perceptual. If perception is richly integrated or even continuous with what we understand skillfully or cognitively – and enacted in one's circumstances – this does not erase differences between perception and thought or between their functions. When we 'think with' an individual so that we are engaged with it in just rule-bound, just part of knowing what to think rather than part of our response when we don't know what to think. **Key Words** aesthetics; enactivism; perception; visual art; John Carvalh o 1. Introduction John Carvalho's Thinking with Images, An Enactivist Aesthetics offers a threepart thesis.[1] First, puzzling artworks draw us into a special kind of thinking when we don't know what to think. Carvalho calls this really thinking and

of contemporary theory, research, and application in aesthetics.

John Carvalho's Thinking with Images, an Enactivist Aesthetics argues that

understanding. Enactivism is the theory of mind that best explains such

thinking. The book illustrates this proposal with four chapters that detail

I raise two concerns. First, the four illustrative chapters say that they are

of mind and might fit with any number of approaches to works of art. The

enactivist, but they do not show this. The illustrative chapters detail

puzzling artworks can draw us into a special activity - thinking when we don't

know what to think - which is valuable because it takes us beyond our skills and

Carvalho's highly personal or individual encounters with enigmatic works of art.

considerations about the works that are not distinguished by a particular theory

its concrete singularity, perception is involved either in the present or the past. There is no need to shunt perception or looking aside as life activities that are

contrasts it with thought that applies rules. Thinking when we don't know what

as Carvalho puts the point. Second, we shouldn't think about artworks in terms of specific theories of the arts or meta-critical strategies that come out of Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist, or post-structuralist work, among others. Rather, puzzling works provide opportunities for personal encounters that attend to a work in its concrete singularity, without being bound by antecedent theoretical commitments. Third, the book espouses a kind of theory nonetheless. In place of advancing specific theories of film or visual art, the book is committed to enactivist theory of mind and seeks to advance such a theory for aesthetics. These theoretical arguments are presented in two opening chapters, followed by four chapters that illustrate and support these positions by recounting detailed engagements with puzzling works. That is, a very short introductory chapter briefly presents the enactivist framework, and the first chapter argues against relying on antecedent theoretical commitments when engaging with individual works. With this frame in place, four chapters illustrate the three-fold thesis:

that enactivism provides the account of cognition that explains thinking when

one doesn't know what to think, which is carried out in highly personal or

individual ways, not driven by theories of the arts. The four personal encounters are with Francis Bacon's Study after Velazques' Portrait of Pope Innocent X,' several photographs by Duane Michals, Marcel Duchamp's installation-like work, Étant Donnés, and Jean Luc Godard's film Le Mépris. I raise two problems. The first concerns the claim that the book presents an enactivist aesthetics. Though the four illustrative chapters say that they are enactivist, they do not show this. The illustrative chapters detail considerations about the works that are not distinguished by a particular theory of mind and might fit with any number of approaches to works of art. We might say that the engagements Carvalho recounts are interpretive in an ordinary sense: they detail facts he learns and quote from sources that help him come to a better understanding of the works or features he finds puzzling. Second, the book does not just focus on thinking when we don't know what to

think; it also claims that such thinking frees us from mere looking. We can

appreciate that Carvalho zeros in on something interesting - the thinking we

engage in when our skills or concepts are not adequate to understand a work in

its distinctive concrete singularity. We may learn much about ourselves and about artworks by examining how we engage with works that are designed to elude seamless recognition and understanding of the whole or its properties. The book is interesting and illuminating in the way it takes us along on four personal engagements with works and artists, though of course there may be specific criticisms or disagreements about the details concerning the works. But Carvalho goes further and claims that when we engage with such works, we are freed from looking. The book discusses the thinking we do with images without mentioning perception, aside from a few claims about being freed from looking. But enactivism does not require us to deny that our engagement with particular works in their concrete singularity is perceptual. If perception is richly integrated or even continuous with what we understand skillfully or cognitively - and enacted in one's circumstances - this does not erase differences between perception and thought or between their functions. Carvalho rightly insists that we can engage with an individual in its concrete singularity so that we 'think with' it in his suggestive phrase. But thinking with an individual involves perception, either in the present moment or in the past. There is no need to shunt perception or looking aside as life activities that are just rule-bound, just part of knowing what to think rather than part of our response when we don't know what to think. 2. Enactivism Let's start with a bit of background about enactivism, which is among a

constellation of theories that try to explain that mental life or mental processes are situated in living active bodies in their broader perspectival contexts. The aim of such theories is to undermine notions of minds or mental activities as "internal." They do so by arguing that there are essential or constitutive connections between ourselves, our bodies, our activities, and our surroundings. We can think of such theories in terms of their emphasis on one of the "four e's" – minds are embodied, embedded, extended and enacted. According to the first three:

mutually constitutive relationships rather than instrumental ones. This perspective derives from J.J. Gibson's revolutionary work, The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception, which is taken as a seminal text.[3] To date, enactivist theories tend to cash out this strong relationship between perception and action in terms of sensorimotor skills or dynamic couplings and to take these as the primary explanatory *model* not just for perception but for "higher" or "more complex" mental processes. Enactivists also tend to extend Gibson's notion of affordances. Originally, affordances are the possibilities for actions, such as sitting or perching or swinging, that an animal, given its specific body, can perceive or pick up directly as it moves around in the light structured by things in its habitat. Gibson defines affordances in terms of highly complex structures in ambient light.[4] A branch structures light in a way that an

appropriately shaped animal picks up, so that the branch affords sitting or

swinging. More loosely, enactivists use the notion of an affordance for any

feature of an object that allows a perceiver to respond to it or to go on to think with it without considering the complex structure of light that would be required to specify that feature. Carvalho writes that his adoption of enactivism is particularly inspired by Alva Noë's Varieties of Presence.[5] Noë proposes that objects are present to us in the sense that thought or perception do not involve internal representations. Presence is an achievement that depends both on the existence of the object and on our largely practical ways for accessing it. This proposal is worked out in understanding – sensorimotor skill – but allows for infusion from conceptual objects rather than just the parts that are not hidden from us, we need to think of perceptual presence in terms of what is available to a perceiver at a place given their skills. In particular, though an object will always have a hidden side from a perceiver, our sensorimotor skills embody expectations of what we would expectations enable experience of a whole voluminous object. Our sensorimotor understanding that objects in the world become visible and available to us more

proposal, then, is this: perceptual consciousness is a special style of access to the world. But access is not something bare, brute or found. The ground of access is our possession of knowledge, understanding, and skills. Without understanding, there is no access and so no perception. My emphasis here is on a special kind of understanding that distinctively underwrites our perceptual access to objects and properties, namely, sensorimotor understanding. We can see what there is when it is there, and what makes it the case that it is there is the fact that we comprehend its sensorimotor significance. Sensorimotor understanding brings the world into focus for perceptual consciousness.[6] 3. Carvalho's Enactivism Inspired by Noë's notion of objects being present to us, Carvalho takes enactivism to emphasize the continuity between a thinking subject and its context: Very generally, as I understand it, enactivism is an ecology of mind, a view of cognition that conceives mind, body and the environment as continuous and not separate or distinct. The mind is inherently interactive by virtue of a body navigating an environment defined by all the bodies in it. ... What I can know and

up the space in an auditorium or to move ahead of others in a museum exhibit to reach less crowded rooms. These are the sorts of embodied skills we exercise when we know what to think. He explains enactivism like this: For the enactivist, ... mind and body and the environment are continuous. The body acts thoughtfully in response to an environment populated with other thoughtful bodies and defined by the interactions of these bodies. This action is thinking but an embodied enactivist form of the thinking we do when we know what to think. [TWI 5] This understanding of enactivism yields the full thesis of the book: I will take thinking generally to be a form of embodied enactive cognition and the

thinking we do when we do not know what to think to be a particular and valuable achievement of embodied enactive cognition. ... what I call "thinking with images"

is a species of that achievement. [TWI 3]

images?

My primary point about *Thinking with Images* is that enactivism does not play specific explanatory roles in the four substantive discussions of puzzling works. Each chapter details an encounter that is interpretive in the ordinary sense of the word. Carvalho voices questions and conundrums presented by a work which he addresses by offering numerous facts and quotations from the artist and various theorists. For example, the chapter on Duane Michals highlights several puzzling portraits. Some, such as Rene Magritte Asleep and Balthus and

Setsuko, are overtly enigmatic: at first encounter they defy expectations we

4. The Scaling Up Problem: What is enactive about thinking with

answers. I think photographs should provoke, should set up the questions, the premise, and not give the answers," it is profound but not pretentious. Michals is thinking, and inspiring us to think, because he feels, and because he doesn't know what to think about what he feels. ... He does not tell us what to think. Instead, he uses his camera to caress the world, bringing the affective power in the service of a thought or a feeling we would not otherwise feel or think. In this way, Michals exemplifies much of what we call thinking with images. [TWI 80-81] But nothing in the considerations about Michals or the particular photographs that Carvalho offers or the way he weaves them together hinges on a specific theory of mind – on whether one's thinking is skillful, embodied, and occurs "with" or "at" the image. If a reader supposed that the thinking Carvalho details occurs "in the mind" through "internal" representational states, there is nothing in the chapter that would stop them from doing so. The discussion in these chapters and others brings to mind Alexander Nehamas's avowedly interpretive quest of Eduard Manet's Olympia in Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art, which Carvalho cites as an inspiration.[9] As personal engagements with artworks, Carvalho's

Nevertheless, we can draw on the enactivist frame of Carvalho's book to fill out our understanding of what each chapter is doing. We can use Noë's account of presence to appreciate that each chapter intends to illustrate the way that Carvalho increases his access to these puzzling works, thereby making each more present. Michals' photographs become *present* to him, or he achieves their *presence*, by learning more about them in ways made possible by understanding or skills he already has. Yet even if we frame what the chapters are doing in terms of these overarching notions from Noë, the facts, quotations, and observations that fill each chapter do not distinguish between different theories of mind. The chapters do not show what explanatory work enactivism provides concerning our encounters with puzzling or enigmatic works. To be fair, one might wonder what *could* be specifically enactivist about an account of the way a particular person pursues a puzzling or enigmatic work?

This is not clear. I can readily imagine the following sort of example. I have

bodily skills whereby I fluidly move to and fro, back and forth, to engage with a

work. I walk towards a work and away from it, enjoying the range where things

come into focus while also pausing to encounter the work more distantly and

more closely. Similarly, I fluidly weave from left to right. Engaging a work in

these ways strikes me as a prime example for enactivist explanation that

[VOP 28] This is important and I believe correct. But the emphasis on skills leaves us with the problem of explaining how all of the thinking we do are skills beyond stipulating this. Noë does not provide this account for all of the thinking we do. In contrast, Shaun Gallagher's *Enactivist Interventions: Rethinking the Mind*, which is also cited by Carvalho, sticks with sensorimotor skills as the explanatory model for more complex thinking.[10] The concluding chapter gestures to some ways enactivism might address the scaling up problem. Gallagher suggests that imagination might extend sensorimotor understanding and that we might think of mathematics in broadly sensorimotor terms. But these sketches do not help explain the thinking we do with images. How do these considerations balance out? On one hand, in all fairness, Carvalho's book can't be expected to provide specific explanations that enactivists have not. The scaling up problem has not been solved in specific detail for the sort of thinking the book highlights. On the other hand, each chapter claims that the thinking it recounts is skillful; Carvalho's ability to find and bring together detailed considerations in response to particular works are claimed to be embodied, situated skills. But the chapters don't connect back to enactivism, and there is no explanation of what makes Carvalho's ability to find relevant facts and texts and put them together a matter of skill. On balance, it seems to me that the book assumes or stipulates, but does not explain or illustrate how its detailed accounts of thinking with enigmatic images are enactivist. Much more would need to be said to satisfy the idea of an enactivist aesthetics from the book's title. 5. Perceiving Puzzling Works: there is nothing 'mere' about looking

My second concern is that the book sets looking aside. Carvalho's suggestion is

that looking is what we do when we know what to think so that it is 'mere

Michals:

looking. [TWI 65-66, my italics]

looking.' We become freed from mere looking when we don't know what to

think. Let's return to the discussion of Duane Michals' Magritte Sleeping. The idea of being freed from looking figures in a quotation Carvalho presents from

paintings he presented such amusing but serious ideas. I was freed from just

Michals' words express the ordinary view we might all share that Magritte's

images do not tether us to the way things are, but prompt us to imagine and wonder. Carvalho places this shared view into the contrast he draws between

rule-bound thought and thinking that is prompted to go beyond known rules:

"When we are freed from just looking, we are freed to think, really think,"

considerations in each chapter are presented as something we do that only

because we don't know what to think." [TWI 66] The interpretive

What had so engaged me in Magritte's work was its ability to perplex. In his world, I could not be sure of anything. Giant roses filled entire rooms, the moon lit up a starry sky at midday and nightgowns could display real woman's breasts. In his

takes place when we are freed from 'just looking.' The book as a whole avoids mention of perception, even though it explains really thinking with images in terms that typically apply to perceiving. For example, the general argument is described as, "An argument ... for working with specific artifacts, for thinking about artworks in their concrete singularity, ideally based on a direct acquaintance with the artworks themselves." [TWI 7, my italics] This sounds like a fairly typical philosophical characterization of perception, but Carvalho puzzlingly avoids using the word. Both intuitively and philosophically, it seems to me that there is nothing mere about looking and that looking is integral to my engagement with puzzling works that make me think. To be sure, while I read something about a work or while I pause to reflect, I will not be simultaneously perceiving the work. But my reading and my thinking will not be freed from my perceptual encounter with the work; rather I will try to keep connected with my encounter through the slender strands of memory, or I will attempt to supplement it with reproductions.

typing – being perceptually present to me and Aristotle not being present to my thought since he does not exist. An intermediate case might be a friend on another continent who is present to my thought by virtue of the sorts of skills I have. Noë's claim is that since his friend Dominic in Germany "scores very low on the movement- and object-dependence scales but the score is not zero ... the difference is one of degree, not of kind." [VOP 27] We can sharpen these ideas. Presence is a matter of degree. Things are more or less present. For presence is grounded in availability and access. Dominic's presence is greater when he is right there before me. It is less when he is in Berlin. We can think of our skills, of our know-how, as defining an access space. Things can be nearer or farther away in access space. To distance in access space there corresponds the intensity or degree of presence. [VOP 34]

nonperceptual. Being out of view, or hidden, is not in itself an impediment to perceptual presence, at least in some of its varieties. I have a sense of the perceptual presence of the back of the tomato, even though I can't actually see it. I am inclined to say that my sense of Dominic's presence is like this. Using the access-space idea, we can say that Dominic is located at a point in my visual access space that is very remote, and so, correspondingly, his visual presence for me is very faint. But critically, my sense of his presence is not entirely devoid of perceptual quality. He is simply much farther away in visual-access space than either the back of the tomato, or the tomato's front. [VOP 34] In sum, perception is not written out of Noë's enactive approach as mere looking. Carvalho is interested in how we achieve the presence of enigmatic works in their concrete singularity. In Noë's terms, this suggests access that is much more perceptual than access to a friend in Germany. If we are inspired by Noë's enactivism, there is no need to suggest that we leave perceptual engagement behind. To end with a little plug for perception, I suggest that thinking with images in their particularity is not freed from looking but might intensify it. We might feel the wonder and the joy of looking when we don't quite know what or how to keep thinking. To put the point more strongly, thinking with images might revel

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[1] John M. Carvalho, Thinking with Images, An Enactivist Aesthetics (New York

forthcoming URL = https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/embodied-cognition/>. [3] J.J. Gibson, The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception (Boston: Houghton) Mifflin, 1979).

[6] Varieties of Presence [VOP], 20. All further references will be in parentheses following the quotation. For a more detailed explanation of his enactive view of perception, see Alva Noë, Action in Perception (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004). For critical discussion of Noë's proposal, see Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 2008 76(3) pp. 660-706; this includes a precis by

Alva Noë, critical articles by John Campbell, Sean D. Kelly, and M.G. F. Martin, with a reply by Noë. [7] Carvalho, Thinking with Images [TWI], pp. 3-4. All further references will be in parentheses following the quotation. Carvalho continues: "To the extent that

the aims of bodies overlap, the affordances that show up for them in the environment are available in common and, so, the skills acquired and refined for engaging those affordances are also available to be shared." P. 4. [8] If we are thinking with an image, the sorts of questions we would have would concern the photograph's concrete singularity, in addition to the more thematic questions Carvalho raises. We might wonder about the formal black

example, or is that the natural set of his face? But I will not pursue this point here, which is related to the distinction between perception and thought that I raise later. [9] Alexander Nehamas, Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). See also Sonia

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to think is not a 'special activity' of thought, but a 'particular achievement' of it

Minds are embodied. Mindedness is essentially linked to kinds of physiological bodies and in each case to particular individual bodies. Minds are embedded. They depend on the natural and social environment;

for example, organisms off load some processing onto the environment so mental activity is distributed across the organism and environment Minds are extended. Mental processes such as perceiving or thinking don't stop at our bodies; they are not just partly distributed to external objects but depend constitutively on them (in part).[2] Enactive theories include all this and emphasize activity. What distinguishes enactivism, at least some of its main variants, is that it focuses on the nexus of perception and action, with the proposal that perception and action stand in

most detail for perceptual presence, which depends on a kind of practical understanding. Noë emphasizes that to explain the fact that we see whole see if we move in certain ways with respect to the object, so that these skills are a kind of understanding that allows us to see whole objects. The perceptual case illustrates some of Noë's key claims. First, it is through our generally. Second, understanding takes many forms, especially, but not exclusively, practical ones: [M]v sense of the visual presence of the tomato's back—in contrast, say, with that of the tomato's insides —consists in practical understanding that simple movements of my head and body in relation to the tomato would bring the back into view. It is visually present to me now; but because I understand that I now have a distinctively visual style of access to it. And the basis of this access is my mastery of the ways in which my movements produce sensory change. The

and refined for engaging the environment in which these affordances show up. I understand affordances to be "the possibilities for action provided by things," by what a thing is as well as what it invites, threatens and does.[7] Carvalho's example of an enactivist explanation concerns the way many people fluidly negotiate each other in a space, for example to get to their seats and fill

achieve is relative to [my] body and to the affordances that show up in the

environment for a body shaped by those affordances and by the skills acquired

might have of portraits. The first portrait shows its subject sleeping, the second shows one of its subjects in profile looking away from us into a mirror so that it is the mirrored side of his face that looks out at us. Carvalho raises questions that most of us might wonder about when looking at Rene Magritte Asleep. "What is Magritte dreaming? Why are we being shown this image of dreaming? How has Michals such intimate access to the great artist to photograph him sleeping? Has all this been staged? How can one know? Does it matter that we know?"[8][TWI 66]Following up on such questions, Carvalho offers a way to understand each work by drawing on quotations from the photographer and a

range of facts. These come together to support the thesis of the book:

When [Michals] says "My photographs are about questions. They are not about

discussions could be slotted into Nehamas' book, since both detail works and writings by artists, critics, and philosophers in order to arrive at an understanding of works that puzzle them. But Nehamas' focus is different from Carvalho's. Nehamas examines loving pursuit of works that hold our interest to argue for the interconnections between beauty, love, and individuality. Works that invite yet elude understanding are beautiful, and the pursuits they engender draw us into communities that help us achieve our individuality, perhaps making us beautiful in the process. In Nehamas' terms, we might say that Carvalho's pursuit of Michals' photographs and the other works shows the various relationships with others into which Carvalho is drawn in answering the 'invitation' that the puzzling works pose. My point is that though the aims of the two books differ and enactivism does not figure in Nehamas' project, the detailed personal encounters with artworks could be interchanged.

highlights how my bodily-perceptual skills are a form of understanding. But I am at a loss as I try to figure out how the thinking Carvalho details is amenable to enactivist explanation. This is known as the 'scaling up' problem for enactivism. It isn't clear how an approach that uses sensorimotor skills or dynamic couplings as its explanatory model can be scaled up to all of the sorts of thinking we do. What about Carvalho's enactivist sources? In Varieties of Presence, Noë does not tie all types of thinking to sensorimotor skills: I do not claim that all thought is extended perception. My claim is that all thought is directed to its object thanks to the thinker's skillful access to the object. In some cases, the skills on the basis of which one has access will be perceptual skills; in other cases, they will be skills of a different sort (e.g. analytic conceptual skills).

This is not the place to get into the large range of philosophical approaches to perception and to examine those that set something like "mere looking" aside. And we don't need to get into this dense field of theoretical distinctions and debates because Carvalho's book is in the ballpark of approaches according to which perception and thought are integrated rather than separate. If we hold

that perception and thinking or understanding are integrated (with theories

motivation – concerning perception – to set perceiving or looking aside.

presence depends on both our sensorimotor skills and the object. Our

dividing about the nature and extent of this), then we do not have theoretical

frame the terms of philosophical enquiry in terms of thinking? In *Varieties of*

Presence, Noë suggests that perceiving and thinking are on a continuum. He

What about enactivism? Does enactivism suggest that we set looking aside and

proposes a very specific continuity. First, recall that Noë argues that perceptual

sensorimotor skills embody expectations that make a whole object – rather than

just its facing side, for example – present to us. Second, Noë argues that there

are intermediate cases between an object – like the computer on which I am

Noë's argument for such continuity is controversial, as is his emphasis that perceptual access is built up out of skilled embodied expectations about what I would see if I were to move in such-and-such ways. Controversy aside, what is relevant for us is that Noë maintains a distinction between perception and thinking even while placing them on a continuum: We can also speak of the modality or quality of presence, as opposed merely to its intensity or degree. And this is fixed not by position in access space, but by which space of access is in question. Spaces have different structures; their structures are determined by the repertoires of skill that structure them. And to these different structures there correspond distinct qualities. Dominic is in my thoughts and imaginings. It would be odd to say that he is present for me perceptually. After all, I don't see, hear, touch or smell him. He is too far away for that. But it would also be false to insist that my sense of his presence is entirely

operation, rather than feeling freed from looking, we might become aware that thinking and perceiving infuse one another. **Sonia Sedivy** sonia.sedivy@utoronto.ca

in looking. When we are drawn beyond our usual comfort zone where looking and thinking cooperate so seamlessly that no attention is drawn to their co-

and London: Routledge, 2019). [2] For example, see the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on "Embodied Cognition." Shapiro, Lawrence and Shannon Spaulding, "Embodied Cognition", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),

dated.

Endnotes

[4] See Gibson, Ecological Approach, Ch. 8 The Theory of Affordances, pp. 140-143. [5] Alva Noë, Varieties of Presence (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

suit Magritte is wearing and his specific bodily posture, like the way his hand is supporting his head and the expression of his face – is it a half smile, for

Sedivy, Beauty and the End of Art; Wittgenstein, Plurality and Perception (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), pp. 77-79. [10] Shaun Gallagher, Enactivist Interventions: Rethinking the Mind (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

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