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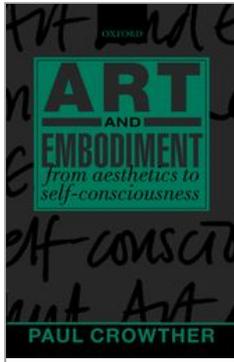
**ART**

**AND**

**EMBODIMENT**

*from aesthetics to  
self-consciousness*

**PAUL CROWTHER**



## Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness

Paul Crowther

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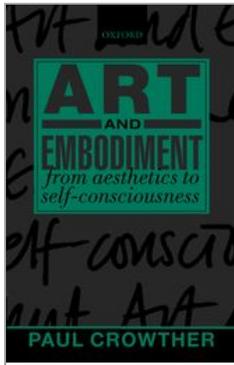
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## Introduction: An Ecological Theory of Art

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### Abstract and Keywords

This introductory chapter begins with a discussion of ontological reciprocity and the philosophical significance of art. It then sets out the book's central argument, that the essence of art is nothing less than the conservation of human experience itself. The artwork as symbolically significant sensuous manifold is able to express the decisive relation between subject and world (ontological reciprocity) at a level that does not obliterate the concreteness of the relation. Indeed, the necessary unity of whole and parts in such a work echoes the inseparable phenomenological and logical unity of embodiment and experience itself. The artwork, in other words, reflects our mode of embodied inherence in the world, and by clarifying this inherence it brings about a harmony between subject and object of experience — a full realization of the self. An overview of the subsequent chapters is presented.

*Keywords:* art, philosophy, ontological reciprocity, human experience, self-realization

I

This work takes as its major premiss the fact of human embodiment. The particular human subject is just one amongst other such sensible beings and things, with whom and which it is engaged in a constant process of reciprocal interaction and modification. The reason why this process is constant is because embodied beings are *finite*. This means that no matter how thoroughly they engage with the sensible world—with *Otherness* (in the broad sense of both other beings and things)—they cannot fix it into absolute, unchanging place. Otherness is radically transcendent. We can take some hold on it, but there is

always *more* to be perceived, always *more* to be done; always *more* than can be contained in any present moment of perception or sequence of actions.

Now, in so far as we are one sensible item in a world of other such items, our most fundamental relation to this world is not that of an inner 'thinking subject' gazing out upon an 'external' world. Rather, we *inhere* in the sensible. Our engagement with Otherness is achieved through the body's sensori-motor capacities operating as *a unified field*. As we grow, this field becomes more unified and complex through physical and social interactions. In particular, its development into language brings with it both the capacity for rational comprehension and the evolution of a sense of personal identity. In concert, all these facts suggest that our sense of self is not a wholly private thing. Rather, it is a function of the reciprocity between our unique position in the world *qua* particular embodied subject, and the broader physical and social circumstances in which we both locate ourselves and are located by forces beyond our control.

As some readers will have gathered, this provisional account of human being-in-the-world is derived substantially from Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It is further discussed in a later chapter of this **(p.2)** work. For the moment, however, I want to focus on one key point. I shall call it ontological reciprocity. As noted above, our relation to Otherness is determined fundamentally not simply by 'mental' acts of cognitive discrimination, but by our sensori-motor capacities (of which language is the highest function) in operation as a unified field. The unity of this field, and the consciousness of self emergent from it, is both stimulated by, and enables us to organize, the spatio-temporal diversity of Otherness. We give it contour, direction, and meaning; thus constituting it as *world*. On these terms, the structure of embodied subjectivity and of the world are directly correlated. Each brings forth and defines essential characteristics of the other. Their reciprocity is ontological as well as causal.

Now, it is crucial to note that the embodied subject's position in this reciprocity is informed by data from non-immediate experience. As Merleau-Ponty puts it,

the life of consciousness—cognitive life, the life of desire or perpetual life—is subtended by an intentional arc' which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological, and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects.<sup>1</sup>

On these terms, our body's hold upon the world is of enormous complexity. In even the simplest experience, rational, sensory, affective, and socio-historical factors are interwoven in an inseparable unity. This inseparability has both a phenomenological and a logical basis. The phenomenological element is the fact that our body's primary reciprocity with the world is largely pre-reflective, that is, it is one wherein we do not consciously separate all the different factors (the

rational, the sensori-motor, the socio-historical, etc.) which are being brought to bear in a particular experience. The logical aspect is that all the elements operative in a moment of experience form a qualitative whole. Remove any one of them and the character of the whole is changed. It becomes a different experience.

Given, then, this phenomenological and logical inseparability of the elements in our ontological reciprocity with the world, the question arises as to how we express such reciprocity, that is, how do we arrive at a *full* and *explicit* understanding of the experience? **(p.3)** The problem here is the conflict between 'full' and 'explicit'. For when we adopt a reflective attitude we can analyse the elements which are operative in a particular experience. However, by analysing—by taking the whole apart—we change the structure of the experience. It finds expression as a *fragmented* whole. The fullness—the qualitative unity—of the reciprocity is lost. The problem here is that of philosophy itself. In this respect, Merleau-Ponty (following Bergson) remarks that

I start from unified experience and from there acquire in a secondary way consciousness of a unifying activity, when, taking up an analytical attitude, I break up perception into qualities and sensations, and when in order to recapture on the basis of these the object into which I was in the first place blindly thrown, I am obliged to suppose an act of synthesis, which is merely the counterpart of analysis.<sup>2</sup>

The point here is that philosophical thought can only articulate ontological reciprocity by projecting its own distinctive operations upon it—that *is* to say, by interpreting our perception of the world as a kind of 'mental' synthesis which brings discrete qualities or sense-data into an ordered relation. This retroactive application to immediate perception of the operations of more reflective thought has been noted by others besides Merleau-Ponty and Bergson. Ryle's attack upon the 'paramechanical' theory in *The Concept of Mind* follows a similar strategy. Some of the points made above about the relation between our primary reciprocity with the world and reflective thought are, for example, paralleled by Ryle's discussion of the difference between 'knowing how' and 'knowing that'. This distinction hinges on the fact that knowing how to perform an action does not, at the same time, demand that we formulate a theory about the correct way it should be done—a theory which then acts causally on our body, stimulating it into the appropriate motions. Rather, we simply *do* it.

My first key point, then, is that between our most fundamental reciprocity with the world *qua* embodied subjects, and our attempts to express it explicitly in philosophical or other kinds of theoretical concepts, there is an abyss. Abstract concepts alone cannot fully recapture the concreteness of ontological reciprocity. We can offer an analysis and description of it, but the act of analysis

and **(p.4)** description is at best a kind of looking on from above. Schiller puts the problem at issue here in very telling terms: 'In order to lay hold of the fleeting phenomenon, he [the philosopher] must first bind it in fetters of rule, tear its fair body to pieces by reducing it to concepts, and preserve its living spirit in a sorry skeleton of words.'<sup>3</sup>

But is there any way round this denuding of the concrete particular? The answer is, of course, yes—through the creation and appreciation of art. Art is the making of symbolically significant form out of, or into, sensuous manifolds. The process of making, here, involves an internal relation between the existence of the specific artist or artistic ensemble, and the resulting artefact. Let me first clarify two of the terms in this complex definition. 'Sensuous manifolds' are complex wholes which are present to the senses, or realized in imagination or through emotional identification. The structure of such manifolds can be predominantly physical, for example articulation in stone, paint, or sound; or predominantly linguistic, for example when language is used expressively as opposed to its normal factual usages. The term 'symbolically significant' is more complex still. It has three senses, two of them descriptive, and the other honorific. The first is when a work adopts some overtly *representational* format, that is, a formalized semantic and syntactic code through which it refers to some aspect of the world other than itself. This, of course, is how pictorial and sculptural representation and literature function. The other descriptive sense of symbolic form is less formalized, and founded, rather, on culturally established associations. For example, we often characterize music in terms of moods or emotions, or on the basis of analogies with gesture and action. Similar considerations hold in relation to non-objective painting and sculpture. Now, sometimes these associations will be based on a purely personal reading of a work. Much more frequently, however, they will be drawn from a common cultural stock which we have learned in the processes of growing up and education. Of course, which associations are made with which forms will vary from culture to culture, but the basis of such associations is rarely arbitrary. If called upon, we will be able to offer some explanation of why such and such a colour or shape is associated with such and such a mood or gesture.

**(p.5)** The remaining sense of 'symbolically significant' is honorific. It arises when some primarily functional artefact—such as a building, or piece of furniture or ceramics—is so excellent as to make us aware of it as a distinctive way of fulfilling the function for which it was designed. In such artefacts, function is transformed into an analogue of subject-matter in representational art. We are not simply interested in using the artefact: we are interested, rather, in *how* this particular work presents or fulfils its function.

On these terms, then, the ontology of the artwork can be viewed from three directions. In the visual arts of painting and sculpture sensuous manifolds are made into symbolic form; in literature, symbolic form is made—through the

expressive articulation of language—into a sensuous manifold; and in the applied arts, the sensuous manifold of a functional artefact becomes symbolically significant by exemplifying its particular mode of functionality. Whichever direction we take, we arrive at the same result—a symbolically significant sensuous manifold. In such a work we have a concrete particular which is charged with semantic and conceptual energy. It is this integral fusion of the sensuous and the conceptual which enables art to express something of the depth and richness of body-hold in a way which eludes modes of abstract thought—such as philosophy. As Hegel rightly noted, what makes art unique is that it is a mode of understanding which is half-way between the concrete particularity of material phenomena, and the abstract generality of pure thought.

These preliminary arguments suggest that art is of philosophical significance through its capacity to express ontological reciprocity. This, however, is only a first step. For in this work I shall argue that such expression—in its various complex forms—is a *need* of self-consciousness itself. To see why this is so it is worth addressing the notion of ecology.

In the most general terms ecology addresses the interaction between organisms and their environments. It is a biological discipline. However, in the case of human ecology, matters are more complex. Here, since the life-form in question is self-conscious, its interaction with the environment and with other (and, indeed, members of its own) species involves psychological as well as biological issues. A healthy reciprocity between the embodied subject and its world is one wherein such a subject finds its own sense of self defined and realized (as well as its physical needs being **(p.6)** satisfied). This focuses on such things as the relations between subject and object of experience, the personal and the collective, and the particular and the general. In a fully developed life, the reciprocity between the human subject and the objects of his or her experience will be balanced and harmonious. In particular, we will seek to recognize, and obtain recognition from, other persons at the level of both relationships themselves and at that of self-externalization, that is, at the level of artefacts made, or projects realized, by us. All in all, we need to see our inner life reflected in, and acknowledged by, the realm of Otherness.

Now, of course, there are many circumstances—some historical and societal, others bound more specifically to our personal situation—where the relation between self and Otherness is disharmonious or even antagonistic. Indeed (as noted earlier), *qua* finite embodied beings, our hold on Otherness is not an absolute one. The world—of both things and other persons—cannot be exhausted or ‘finalized’ in our mere perception of it, or through practical projects. Even the most profound love for another person does not enable us to totally intersect with him or her. As Lacan remarks (in a possibly unique moment of lucidity), ‘You do not see me from where I see you.’ This means that the reciprocity

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between subject and object of experience is unstable. It has to be achieved—sometimes from the most adverse circumstances. Art has a decisive role to play in this task. For (as I shall argue at more length further on in this text) the artwork *qua* symbolically significant sensuous manifold is founded on an *internal relation* between the creator's experience and the made artefact. Its integration of symbolic content, sensuous material, and personal experience enables it to reconcile the general subject/object division in a number of ways. For example, in order for the individual to be at home with himself or herself, the needs of the mind and of the senses must both be satisfied. Art is a major satisfaction of this need in so far as it brings rational and sensuous material into an inseparable and mutually enhancing relation. Again, the individual needs to feel at home with the world of material things. Art optimally satisfies this need in so far as it involves the appropriation of nature for human ends, but in a way that facilitates greater awareness of sensuous material itself. More significant still, the individual needs to be at home with other human beings. This involves being able to identify with, and appreciate, others, on the basis of free rather than coercive **(p.7)** relationships. Ideally, through identifying with and appreciating the Other, we discover truths about our own self and its potential. Again (as I shall show at length in this text), art facilitates this to the optimum degree.

We are thus brought to the fundamental contention of this study. The essence of art is nothing less than *the conservation of human experience itself*. The artwork as symbolically significant sensuous manifold is able to express the decisive relation between subject and world (ontological reciprocity, as I have termed it) at a level which does not obliterate the concreteness of the relation. Indeed, the necessary unity of whole and parts in such a work echoes the inseparable phenomenological and logical unity of embodiment and experience itself. The artwork, in other words, *reflects* our mode of embodied inherence in the world, and by clarifying this inherence it brings about a harmony between subject and object of experience—a full realization of the self. In the creation and reception of art, we are able to enjoy a free-belonging to the world.

An ecological understanding of art on these lines is not new. Its first vague stirrings are in Kant's theory of art. It is then substantially developed by Schiller, and stated more fully still in Hegel's *Aesthetics*. In the twentieth century it has reappeared (albeit with many modifications and new inflections) in the work of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, and Adorno, amongst others. In this work I will effect further modifications to it by critically engaging with the work of some of these thinkers.

## II

Let me now briefly situate the ecological approach in relation to dominant tendencies in contemporary aesthetics. First, much aesthetic theory (in the English-speaking world and beyond) has been dominated by strands of an ahistorical formalism, most of which stem from, in effect, treating Kant's

aesthetic of nature as though it were a theory of art. These varieties of formalism hold that the artwork is a unity of formal qualities which, through disinterested contemplation, gives rise to aesthetic experience. The difficulties with this sort of approach are manifold. For example, they rarely address what scope should be allowed to the terms 'form' and 'aesthetic experience', and why, indeed, these should be so important **(p.8)** to human beings. Worse still, such approaches invariably construe the key notion of 'disinterestedness' in psychological terms, as a kind of detached 'attitude' taken up by the observer. This leaves formalism open to the claim that there simply is no such attitude, or, in more sophisticated versions of the objection, that the notion of a disinterested attitude is inconsistent with the realities of humankind's concrete historical and ideological settings. Later on in this text I shall engage with these problems by restating some of formalism's key concepts in logically, phenomenologically, and historically enriched terms. (This, of course, amounts to a transformation.)

Now, it has seemed to some commentators that formalist approaches have also been called into question by developments within the art-world itself. The advent, for example, of works which are created by an artist simply designating some item as 'art' rather than making it (such as Duchamp's ready-mades), or where the artist's 'idea' or 'text' is the work, are cases in point. For, in the former case, the object of appreciation is not so much the item's formal qualities as the new 'artistic' use to which it is being put. In the latter case, there is simply no object to which disinterested attention can be directed. Developments such as these, of course, have led some philosophers to formulate Institutional definitions of art. These focus on the claim that all that is required for the creation of art is that some accredited member of the art-world designates an item 'art' on the basis of some theory. On these terms, what is decisive in the definition of art is not the making of artefacts, but rather the situating of items in a specific social and intellectual context. This view itself has proven controversial. In this study, I will propose the following objection. The making of symbolically significant sensuous manifolds is what the concept 'art' has crystallized around in historical terms. If, therefore, it can also be shown that such artefacts have logically distinctive properties which are *not* shared by works created by designation, then we would be entitled to disqualify the latter from the status 'art'. In so doing, we would also be refuting the Institutional definitions of art, since these take designated works as their paradigm examples of 'art'.

The main reason why the ecological theory of art has not been more widely recognized is because of its complex links with Marxism. There is much in Marx's early appropriations of Hegel (notably in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, and Part I **(p.9)** of *The German Ideology*) which is highly amenable to the ecological approach. However, the main tradition of Marxist aesthetics has been a reductionist one—owing more to the dogmas of 'scientific socialism' than to the modest philosophical anthropology of Marx's early work. It

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is only in the late twentieth century, most notably in the writings of Adorno and Marcuse, that Marxism has reached a level of theoretical maturity which enables it to approach art in a non-reductionist manner. However, just at the point where this has happened, Marxism itself has been devastated as a potent left-wing force for historical change. By this devastation I do not simply mean the popular revolutions and cult of the market economy, which are currently destroying Marxist states. I mean, rather, the even more radical developments in politics and cultural theory, which are associated with feminism, and certain strands of poststructuralism—notably the work of Foucault. The upshot of these developments has been a return to crude reductionism. What counts as good art, what counts as art itself is seen as, in effect, the institutionalization of the interests and preferences of dominant power-groups (notably the white, male, heterosexual middle classes). On these terms, the proper object of study for aesthetics or cultural theory (if, indeed, such practices are still valid at all) is not art—but rather the societally determined uses of modes of representation and ‘discourse’.

Now (as I have already argued in my *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*), the major problem with these approaches is that they fail to engage with the logical and phenomenological conditions which have enabled various power élites to privilege certain artefacts and group them together under the label ‘art’. They fail, in other words, to engage with art and the aesthetic domain in anything other than historical and sociological terms. Characteristically, art and the aesthetic are summarily dismissed as ‘fetishized’ or ‘reified’ or ‘sexist’ historically specific modes of value or preference which have no validity beyond the narrow and oppressive interests of the power-group(s) responsible for their ‘construction’. What these responses overlook is that, *qua* embodied subjectivity, human being *is* structured around constants. Some aspects of ‘being-in-the-world’ are historically specific and subject to change, but the *fact* of ontological reciprocity itself is the very root condition of human being. The needs to externalize oneself, to achieve recognition from the Other, and self-recognition through the Other, are needs **(p.10)** intrinsic to embodied subjectivity. If, therefore, it can be shown that certain kinds of artefacts fulfil these needs in a distinctive and positive way, then we would rightly assign to them (whatever ostensible social or utilitarian functions they may happen to serve) a universal significance in the ecology of human experience. In this study, I shall claim this status for art—as symbolically significant sensuous manifold.

### III

I have offered, then, an overview of the ecological theory of art and its relation to contemporary aesthetics. The time has now come to indicate my strategy of exposition in the main body of this text. Given the basic relation which I have posited between art and philosophy, the question of strategy cannot be straightforward. For how can philosophy systematically articulate the concrete formations of art without doing violence to their particularity? There are various