

Practical Aesthetics Revised: Updating Monroe Beardsley's Aesthetics for the 21st Century

by Stephen Knudsen

2018

Critic and Sr. Editor/ ARTPULSE Magazine

Professor of Painting/ Savannah College of Art and Design

In a 2008 Frieze art fair lecture the celebrated art theorist Thierry de Duve opened with a bombshell on the state of art criticism today: He stated,

“What I really miss, when I tour the art fairs and biennials or read art criticism today, is the aesthetic wars of yore. The anything- is-allowed liberalism that reigns in today's art world has engendered a new form of respect supposedly based on the mutual recognition of differences and identities, but is actually founded on the motto, ‘I shall not infringe on your domain—don't mess with mine.’ The result is that we are confronted with works that exacerbate idiosyncrasies, but very rarely display the singularity of a true work of art.”



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, photographed by Alfred Stieglitz.
The 1917 original, a urinal signed R. MuTT

This pronouncement caught my attention, not only because it resonated with my own views, but because many of us who think such things dare not say them publicly, and a lot of folks would not want us to. And that was a plot point in the lecture. Thierry de Duve explained that when he sent this remark to the Fair as his advertising “blurb”, the powers –that- be edited—or sanitized—it into something unrecognizable, much to de Duve’s chagrin. The problem of course with infringing on each other’s domain is that it means taking a position on something, believing in something, even to the point of judgment.

With de Duve parting the waters, I feel only slightly safer in admitting that I have fostered the seemingly out-of-fashion concept of judgment through 26 years of leading university critiques, a decade of writing criticism, and editing a large contemporary art glossy. Judgment, of course, requires criteria of aesthetic and critical goodness. That is the real problem. Where do we turn for this in the age of pluralism? My answer to students and writers is simply to turn to something that you can believe in with abandon. Just truly believe in SOMETHING and then let’s set about infringing on each other’s domain. To those looking for suggestions, I have one that has served me well, and that will serve as the subject of this essay.

In 1958, the art philosopher Monroe Beardsley created an elegant and practical aesthetic framework.¹ The theory proposes that the wide variety of reasons for aesthetic goodness could be positioned and balanced into just three categories: intensity, complexity and unity, known as ICU. I have seen the power of ICU in classroom critiques and self-critiques and in the making of art that engages--art that, as Mark Rothko said, is “felt even when you have turned your back on it.” And I have used it to good ends in my own writing of art criticism and have encouraged it in the work of *ARTPULSE* writers.

Years ago, as my students and I initially noodled around Beardsley’s ICU, I noticed great interest in the introduction. But soon pen would drop from paper as things fell short. It seemed to us that a number of important “qualities” were missing from the ICU categories. Also, Beardsley provided no examples, and the qualities that were articulated seemed too dogmatic.

So, eventually I attempted substantial surgery, expanding and improving Beardsley’s ICU for the

Knudsen’s Revised Qualities of Intensity

The list below is not a complete list and most of the individual qualities are possibilities and not strict prerequisites of intensity. One should take liberty to add other qualities as needed.

- **Perceptual Shifting:** The ability of the work to be clearly perceived in two distinctly different ways. One of many possible shifts is a painting being an abstraction of paint up close and a recognizable picture further away.
- **Anti- aesthetic/aesthetic synthesis:** ex. Dadaism
- **Innovative Re -contextualization:** Taking something and profoundly changing its meaning or purpose by putting it into a new context.
- **Ambiguity:** A condition where a work is not fixed within a singular meaning but rather evokes different and even contradictory meanings that may add intrigue, profundity, humor, etc.
- **Personal mark:** An artist’s unique visceral mark. For example the way paint was applied to a surface that is as personal as a signature and gets captured in the work. Other markers of individuality fit here as well.
- **Innovation:** A new way of working, thinking and/or producing.
- **Beauty**
- **Clarity**
- **Forcefulness:** Confrontation, urgency, sensation, eroticism, tragedy, vulgarity, technical crudity.
- **Delicacy:** Tenderness, seduction, sensuality, allure.
- **Intellectual Gamesmanship:** Mystery, puzzles, questions, information, story, humor
- **Viscerally Pleasurable:** Emotional and sensory charge
- **Technical virtuosity**
- **Sublimity**
- **Paradox:** Synthesis of any opposites.
- **Hybridization**

21st-century. I overhauled and robustly expanded the possible qualities of ICU and put the new structure to the test in specific examples. What follows is the result. (For Beardsley's unaltered ICU theory, consult his text *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, p. 462-64.)

Intensity

Of the three categories (intensity, complexity, and unity), intensity is the hardest to define. The late critic, Robert Hughes, spoke of great art as having a "Whitmanesque" quality where the work inhales the world around it. What a beautiful take on intensity's inherent memorability, energy, strength, depth, and emotional force. I like to think of his definition as *intensity*.

For a less poetic and more practical definition, let's further define some of intensity's potential traits. One caveat, though: anything offered here is only a possible trait and not a required trait. Also, this is not a complete list of traits, only examples. I will cover a few of the potential traits of intensity listed in the sidebar. (see "Knudsen's Revised Qualities of Intensity")

One potentially important quality of intensity that holds great power is perceptual shifting. Perceptual shifts are paradoxes in a work of art that can occur any time an aspect of the work can be perceived in two clear and opposing ways, and this gives opportunity for added intensity.



Neil Welliver, courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York The installation shot is from the exhibition, "Neil Welliver: Selected Paintings," closing June 29, 2018.



Neil Welliver, Detail of Brushwork, Diane with Soap 1967, oil on canvas, full painting, 48x 48”
courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York,

Intensity: 2D/3D Perceptual Shift

Consider the 2D/3D perceptual shift in many objective paintings. Just observe people looking at paintings. They walk back and forth over a kind of shift threshold to see the work from multiple distances. They do this because it unlocks a type of intensity in the painting. At a distance, a painting with depicted objects is perceived as a picture, yet up very close it is perceived as personal marks, sometimes visceral strokes of paint, rising off of a canvas. To invoke Robert Hughes again, I will go to a favorite example: Neil Welliver. In his text *American Visions*

Hughes said that the twigs in a Welliver painting are as much Pollock as they are Bramble. The twigs feel like Abstract Expressionism as much “as you feel the twigs plucking at your coat”.² See the two Welliver examples. From a distance the pictorial locks into perception and up close (see detail) abstract mark locks into perceptions. At the shift threshold- that magical distance from the painting these two perceptions try to reach a kind of homeostasis that never quite realizes. It is both a picture and an abstraction. How do we have it both ways? To my way of thinking, it is not unlike the duck /rabbit drawing introduced by psychologist J. Jastrow in 1900. Just as we can see a duck in a drawing, and then it disappears to be a rabbit. Then back again. In 1967 Ludwig Wittgenstein reflected upon such puzzle pictures as this when he wrote, “I *describe* the alteration (change of aspect) like a perception; quite as if the object had altered before my eyes.... The expression of a change of aspect is the expression of a *new* perception and at the same time of the perception’s being unchanged”³

We never tire of the paradoxical currents of visceral mark and recognizable picture in painting because it contains the beloved 2D/3D perceptual shift so ubiquitous in painting since Manet and Courbet.

Intensity: Anti-Aesthetic/Aesthetic Perceptual Shift

There is also a work’s potential to evoke a perceptual shift from non-art to art, and then back to non-art and so forth. I call this kind of perceptual shift an *anti-aesthetic/aesthetic perceptual shift*. Once the mind registers something as “art,” it takes admirable mental dexterity to deconstruct it into non-art. The reverse is also true. But such perceptual shifting back –and- forth is the nature of some works, and the recognition of this shift helps to make sense of more difficult artworks such as Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*, one of his first ready-mades. On a related topic, the nuances of the one-way perceptual shift from non-art to art is key to pioneering aesthetic theory of philosopher John Valentine. See his text *Beginning Aesthetics*.

For many viewers, *Fountain* is a quandary. Is it sincere or a practical joke? Even its title is a slippery combination of non-art and art that can denote clear water flowing over sculpture as easily as a urinating man. And while Duchamp claimed the urinal was an arbitrary object aesthetically, its white porcelain has several aesthetic properties (smooth texture and a sensual shape) that are difficult to ignore, especially when presented in a gallery or museum instead of on a bathroom wall.

What is clear is that when Duchamp put forth *Fountain* as an aesthetic object to be honored as such, his intention was to provoke. Duchamp presented *Fountain* as an ironic and enigmatic piece. As perception of the object oscillates back and forth in the anti-aesthetic/aesthetic shift, intensity manifests. Once fixed in a work of art, paint does not just shift in and out of its aesthetic self-hood like plumbing fixtures do. Is it any wonder then that *Fountain's* intensity engendered a turn in the course of Western art.



Pablo Picasso, *The Family of Saltimbanques*, 1905. oil on canvas, 212.8 cm x 229.6 cm.
National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Intensity: Subject-Matter Perceptual Shift

In *The Family of Saltimbanques*, Picasso created a subject-matter perceptual shift.) At first glance the painting is a portrait of circus performers, perhaps inspired in part by the performers of Cirque Medrano. But closer inspection reveals that the narrative depicted is taken directly from the life of the painter. Study of context shows that the work is also about Picasso, his friends, his lover, and a little girl all caught up in a disturbing episode.

In 1905, Picasso was living in Montmartre with his first love, Fernande Olivier. The couple took in a little orphan girl whom Picasso and his friends grew to adore. But to Picasso's displeasure, Olivier tired of the girl and insisted the child be sent away. In the painting, Picasso depicts himself as the harlequin and his closest friends as other circus performers. Olivier is separated from the group in the far right corner of the painting. The emotional tension over the child's fate is expressed by all of the figures looking away in thought and by Olivier's distance from the group. This perceptual shifting of Picasso's circle back again to a group of transient circus performers gives the content more dimensions and adds to the universal intensity of the work.



Michael Heizer, *Levitated Mass*, 2012, 21' tall granite quarry fragment in a permanent installation at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Image courtesy of photographers Joshua Dildine and Hilary Scott Dildine

Intensity: Theoretical perceptual shift

One of the most powerful potential traits of intensity is the paradox of a theoretical perceptual shift. And one of the most relevant 21st century demonstrations of this is Michael Heizer's *Levitated Mass*, a 340-ton granite boulder now propped on a descending trench at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It is a paradoxical expression of two contradictory sublimes: the older Kantian sublime and the newer postmodern sublime.

But before we get too theoretical, let me recap the story behind this work. *Levitated Mass* is in a rare big league of rock moving. Humans usually do not move rocks this big so far. The 10 million dollar Heizer project moved the 340-ton quarry boulder 105 miles by a special 196-wheeled transport to LACMA. As a football-field long centipede, this contraption inched the rock along to its destination for eleven nights. It was the epitome of a postmodern spectacle. Michael Govan, LACMA director, in an NPR interview foretold of the magic of the piece. "You will be able to walk down under it. As you walk under it that rock bottom moves up and you will feel the sense of a huge monolith that's kind of levitated."⁴

I arrived long after the media blitz—13 months to be exact—to write about *Levitated Mass* for the *Huffington Post*. Through my stubbornness to spend the full day with the rock—from sunrise to sunset—I noticed something I'd not yet seen in the discussion of *Levitated Mass*. Something extraordinary occurred at sunset. (And it turns out that this only happens in April/May.) When it happened, everyone present became believers. Unlike any other time of day, some even took to lying down in the trench. As I faced due west, the sun dropped directly behind the rock to be perfectly eclipsed. The sun then reappeared as it dropped into the slot of the ramped space directly below the monolith. Walking down the ramp in these final minutes of sunset, two relative motions intersected: the sun dropped and the rock rose. Thus, the seemingly grand

narrative of moving the rock was, in the end, just a blip in the bigger story that points to sublime space, celestial movement, and geologic time. Ultimately, the rock in that moment pointed to that head-on crash of imagination with infinite space, the sublime so perfectly articulated in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.⁵

When my essay was published, the art historian and theorist James Elkins graced the comment page with an insight that brings our argument of paradox, and thus *intensity*, to full measure. He stated,

Heizer makes me wonder if it's worth revisiting the idea of the sublime. Here, sublime is vast in time and space, which is close to Kant's original 'mathematical' and 'dynamical' sublime. There is an overlay of late Romanticism in the emphasis on individual viewers' reactions, and there's a need for hyperbole and excess (the largest stone, the most amazing illusion, the unparalleled installation) that reminds me of what Karsten Harries called 'the kitsch economy.' All this by way of saying Heizer's is an old-fashioned sublime, unlike more recent postmodern senses of the sublime, which have to do with inevitable partial failure; lack of transcendence; the inadequacy of the artist's imagination and means; an uncertainty about the function of the sublime; modesty in scale and ambition; and references to local, subjective time rather than time that comes in pieces other than infinity and 'geologic' epochs. In short, I wonder if this, and associated pieces and projects, are as much a part of an older modernism as they are part of the newly immersive, spectacular pieces we've come to expect from artists like Eliasson in the last ten years.⁶

I might add to Elkin's remarks that this Kantian sublime/Postmodern sublime paradox in *Levitated Mass* makes it, to my way of thinking, a perfect artistic expression of the paradoxes in metamodern thought. Paradox as a function of intensity can lead to some astonishingly relevant and philosophical destinations.

I have written at length on **metamodernity** and **metamodernism** elsewhere and a full discussion is beyond the scope of this essay.⁷ But I will make a quick pass since the metamodern generation

does grapple with the grandest of perceptual shifts. I usually proceed with a simple metaphor that is good to picture and carry throughout these thoughts as an anchor of meaning. For that I take you back to my youth. I grew up in the Missouri Ozarks among jewel-like, stony-bottom, crystal-clear rivers. There, two radiant tributaries of Jacks Fork River come together like two lovers. One stream is comfortably warm and the other stream hails directly from a spring of bone chilling water. Exactly where the two streams merge, one warm and one cold, one can stand chest deep in the rushing water on a summer day. Standing exactly where the two streams meet, cold runs over one side of one's body and warm on the other. The biological confusion it causes is just extraordinary. On one side of the body blood rushes to the core of the body and on the other it rushes to the surface. That haptic tension is one of the greatest feelings, standing there in rushing water balanced on two disparate extremes reaching for some kind of strange homeostasis that can never quite come in such a position.

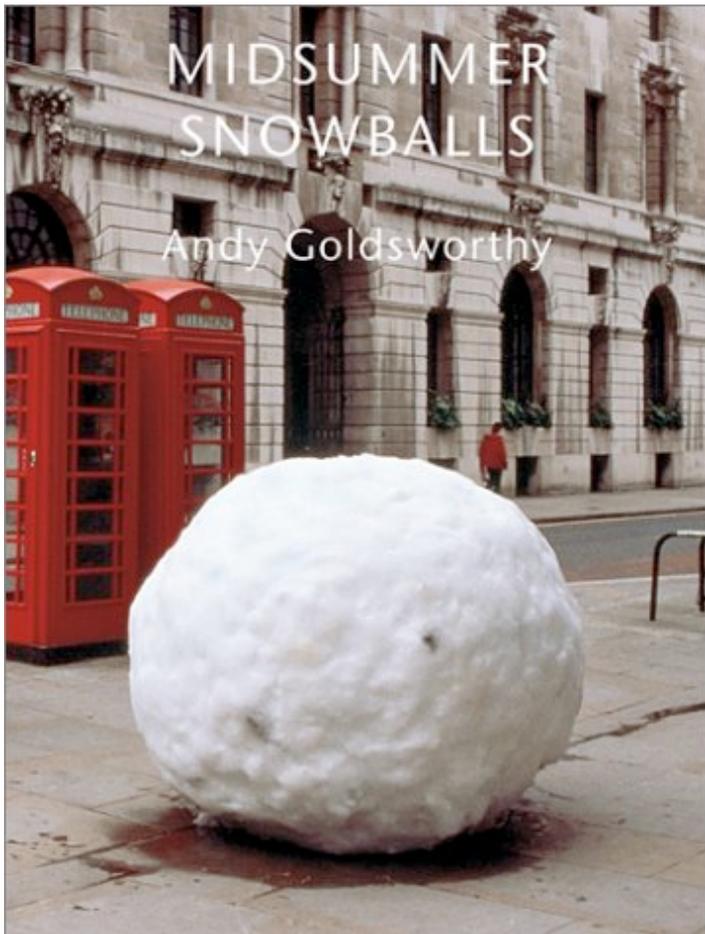
Likewise, in **metamodernity** in the 21st century, a kind of confusion is engendered. But the two great currents of contradiction are socio-technological: the current of modernity and the current of postmodernity. It is a great but familiar paradox. Look at any science lab and the world and we see that the Enlightenment lives. We believe it too. It is our story now--a love for a computer that is as a lover- ever present in the caress of keys and the gaze into the window of the thinking machine's soul. We have faith in this loved one. We believe in it. And yet, even as we believe it, paradoxically we also doubt it and other tenants of modernity 's utopian promises. The mushroom clouds mark us. The current of Postmodernity of course is not so simple as a psychological regalement in the sublime reality of the mushroom cloud, a marker of supreme doubt in human reasoning and technology engendered by the potential energy of the earths nuclear warheads, the potential of nuclear apocalypse. There is more. As the information age

rose, with its amped -up accoutrements (the digital, the automated, and the simulated), postmodern theorists began to point to another, quieter apocalypse, a new kind of trajectory of humanity's slip and slide into the inhuman. It is one of being overtaken by our own machines into the Hyperreal. Jean Baudrillard, the late postmodern social theorist is the most poignant author on this. ^{8,9}

So then the argument in a nutshell is that **Metamodernism** responds to **metamodernity** with art and literature that regards this belief/doubt paradox. This basic definition and term **metamodernism** was coined by Timothy Vermeulen and Robin Van der Akker in 2010 and for that I am exceedingly grateful. I am with them on their definition of **metamodernism** but not their timing of it. In an essay in this anthology and elsewhere¹⁰ they identify it as a post-postmodernism phenomenon. Since my collaborative writings with those theorists I have a diverging argument. Timothy Vermeulen* and Robin Van der Akker* see metamodernism as a postpomo phenomenon, a 21st century "New Dawn". I respectfully disagree. In contrast I propose **metamodernism** as an artistic outpouring comingled with **postmodernism**(and extending back as far as postmodernism). Works of **metamodernism** can identified as early as the 1960s and are an outpouring of an age of **metamodernity** extending back to the mid 20th century where the current of postmodernity and the current of modernity first rushed in parallel over our collective psyche , where Einstein's dreams become Oppenheimer's tears , where the emblem of the end of the world was created as nuclear plumes. Where paradoxically we believe as much as we doubt our human trajectory.

Michael Heizer's *Levitated Mass*, remember, started in 1969 as a detailed sketch. *Levitated Mass* has a metamodern perceptual shift. In the most definitive metamodern work cynicism does

not simply give away to hopeful sincerity (give way as one might infer from this quotation). The definitive works always have a tension between poles whether that that is the postmodern spectacle vs. the modern sublime, or the dystopia outlook vs. utopian outlook, or superficial gamesmanship vs. great substance, or simply despair vs. hope. The metamodern work needs two poles, at least, and it needs tension between those poles, just as paradoxical tension is the very essence of our collective psyche in metamodernity (the metamodern age). And to get on point this is exceptionally profound perceptual shifting—critically relevant and resonant.



Andy Goldsworthy, *Snowballs in Summer*, 2001
Book cover *Midsummer Snowballs* Hardcover – November 1, 2001
by [Andy Goldsworthy](#) (Author), [Judith Collins](#) (Introduction)

Intensity: Innovative recontextualization

Considering *Fountain* once again, it is the iconic example of innovative *recontextualization*—our next potential trait of intensity. In some works, recontextualization is the primary vital force on which the very existence of the work depends. To get a bit more current, consider Andy Goldsworthy's *Snowballs in Summer* series. In a 20th century winter in Scotland, Goldsworthy rolled snowballs the size of Volkswagens and put them in a deep freezer until the 21st century. Then, the night before June 21, 2000 (Midsummer's Day) he placed the 13 one-ton snowballs throughout London. Thousands of the city's pedestrians were stunned the next morning, encountering the giant snowballs. On that hot summer day, the simple snowball proved itself as a great recontextualization.

Intensity: Innovation

Consider another potential intensity quality: innovation. Its power can extend beyond mere novelty and profoundly affect the viewer, especially when innovation serves content on intellectual and visceral levels. An example of such strong innovation is found in the work of the kinetic sculptor Theo Janssen. Janssen's *Strandbeests* are completely wind-powered machines, often the size of a small house, that mimic and amplify nature. To see Janssen's work in motion, visit www.strandbeest.com. The man-made machines use simple electrical conduits in a way that seems biological or living.

Intensity: Intellectual gamesmanship

When early film/video artists and their minions ascended into the gallery, producing cinematic work with high film production values was not the point. This pioneering work was full of possibility by virtue of its anti-cinematic stance. Think of John Baldessari's 1971 performance video *I Am Making Art*. The artist filmed himself making slow-motion, Tai Chi-like gestures and dryly announcing with each movement, "I am making art." It parodied the earnestness of much performance and conceptual film art while it also paradoxically announced a certain sincerity in earnest Duchampian attitudes that anything can be art. The banal production values exacted a kind of perfection on the piece. This was the same year that Baldessari famously had students repeatedly write, "I will not make any more boring art." on a gallery wall. Pretty cool: using banality to make work that is anything but boring. This Baldessari brand of wit and understated production still overlays some film/digital work in the gallery today—most of it, unfortunately, not as smart as Baldessari's.



Eija-Liisa Ahtila, *The House*, 2002. Super 16mm color film transferred to three-channel video, 14 min. loop. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris. © Crystal Eye Ltd, Helsinki

Intensity: Beauty

There is a completely different lineage that feeds some film/digital artists today. It is a Bill Viola-kind of high aesthetic—an acoustic and production value that comes more from traditional cinematic artists like Bergman and Tarkovsky than the film lineage of Warhol or Baldessari.

Beauty rises as a primary force of intensity in the work. I do not intend on promoting beauty with “the salesman saliva.” to quote David Humphrey. But a nod is deserved here. In James Joyce’s 1916 novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the author implies that there is a biological basis for beauty as an aesthetic quality. As humans, we link beauty with phenomena that are key to our survival, such as the role of symmetry, balance, recognition, and memorability, in the very

reproduction of our species. Perhaps light, path, or gradient and space are beautiful because we need them to exist.

Trying to get a pulse on beauty is a precarious endeavor. David Humphreys essay in this anthology is engagingly balanced and sensible. He ends with, “I’m tempted to go against the artist in me that argues against words and throw a definition into the black hole of beauty definitions; that beauty is psychedelic, a derangement of recognition, a flash of insight or pulse of laughter out of a tangle of sensation; analogic or magical thinking embedded in the ranging iconography of desire. But any definition of beauty risks killing the thing it loves.” Right on. But still I cannot help myself. Perhaps a contemporary example sits better than a definition.¹¹

Enter, Eija-Liisa Ahtila (b.1959)

For two decades, the Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila has been a figure in the vanguard movement re-imagining film art. Like Viola, she uses cinematic production values and *beauty* but then goes even farther, adhering to some old-fashioned ideas about film, like telling a story. There is more Bergman in her work than Baldessari. But as Ahtila keeps many cinematic conventions, she breaks just as many. That is why terms like *expanded* or *extended cinema* suit this kind of work. An example? She keeps to the traditional idea of showing one moment to the next in linear flow, but she does it on multiple screens from multiple viewpoints. Imagine seeing close-ups, distant shots, and cutaways of the same scene and moment simultaneously. Imagine being surrounded by these multiple channel images that curve around you, requiring you to make choices about what to look at rather than being spoon-fed edits on a single screen.



Eija-Liisa Ahtila, *The House*, 2002, 14 min. DVD installation for 3 projections with sound. Photo: Marja-Leena Hukkanen, Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris. © Crystal Eye Ltd, Helsinki

Her best work is *House*. The film opens with a woman, Elisa, coping with her mental illness by driving up to her isolated house in the pristine wilds of Finland. In one of the most inspired scenes, Elisa rises and floats 20 feet above the forest floor, then slowly and peacefully flies (drifts, really) through the thick conifers leading to her house. Elisa has lost her grip on what is real. Gravity is no more. She moves through lush foliage, grasps the eaves, then her legs sink to the ground, as if in water. The multiple screens give us Elisa's own point of view, simultaneously with alternate perspectives and angles, and we feel transported.... airborne.

The integrity of this sensation is enhanced by the rich sounds of brushing through pine needles high up in the trees, the wind, and birds — all without musical score, an admirable sparseness used in the whole film. This scene is by far the most eloquent and beautiful stream of images that I have experienced in a gallery film piece. And, I dare say, that it is better than the entire

computer-generated flight we see in theaters. Ahtila authentically made the actor airborne via some circus gear and heavy lifting.

Extended cinema allows us something that is closer to the visual decisions we make in non-virtual space. At the same time it defies real world experience with its poetry. Images do not link up into panoramas; they give us eyes that are somewhat more omnipresent. As we view this surround, even as we listen to the narrative of Elisa's existence and intellectual inventory, a neutral, documentary style pervades as the narration speaks to us directly with the calm of an objective outsider.

House captures and reveals the circular, yet fractured, pattern of the psychosis of the protagonist (Elisa) through the constant and simultaneous movement flowing between the three panels. At the same time, she utilizes the poetic overtones and synchronicities of great triptychs traditionally found in the repertoire of painting. Treated in this way, paranormal episodes transcend into iconography that feels mystical, even miraculous.



Eija-Liisa Ahtila, *The Horizontal*, 2011, 6 min. 6-channel projected installation. Screening format: synchronized HD files. (Original format: 5K Red raw), 16:9/1:1, 78. Dolby Digital 5.1 No dialogue. Photo: John Berens, Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris. © Crystal Eye Ltd, Helsinki

Another intensely beautiful piece is *The Horizontal*. Ahtila filmed a giant spruce in six sections on a very windy day and projected it horizontally on a huge stretch of wall. Since the filming was asynchronous, the wind movements do not match panel-to-panel, creating a mesmerizing, wave-like complexity.

Ahtila finally — and wisely — decided to film one section at a time, moving the camera into six positions up the full length of the tree. Then, in the museum, turning the tree horizontally permits enlargement of the spire into an intimately gigantic portrait of poetic movement that I could walk by every day, like a great painting. The tree is the protagonist in the simplest of narratives and is neither exactly cinema nor painting but still beholden to both. If Eija Liisa Ahtila's works were literature, *The Horizontal* would be pure poetry and *House* would be prose. It shows that work

with a regard for *beauty* and transcendence, even in our bewildered state as sentients, does not have to be put into the satirical air quotes of postmodernism to be critically and aesthetically relevant.¹²

(Eija-Liisa Ahtila is a name worth remembering (pronounced Eye-ya Lisa Ah- teel- ya).

I hesitate now to leave the topic of intensity as we have just scratched the surface of its potential. Please, though, see the sidebar on intensity and venture into your own examples of intensity. Consider works that keep coming back to your memory, that continue to pull at your curiosity. We move now to topics that are more familiar, which are taught in design courses throughout the world. What is left below is a brief look at the C and U of ICU, Complexity and Unity. This look, too, will be only a start on the topic's full potential. Do see the tables on Complexity and Unity at the end of the essay.

Complexity

Complexity is the tendency toward many parts and/or qualities in intricate arrangement and contradiction. At a basic level, complexity involves building variety within and among formal elements of a work: line, shape, value, hue, saturation, translucency, opacity, textures, etc.

Complexity taps a viewer's intelligence and visceral feelings and allows for a cognitive and gut-level appreciation of art. Complex art implicitly tests our understanding, defies easy satisfaction and remains dynamic. We will only touch on complexity here but for more examples see TABLE "Knudsen's Revised Qualities of Complexity" in the appendix.

First, let us look at how richness in contrasts involving formal elements builds complexity. In the visual arts, seven color schemes are often noted. They are arranged as follows in an order from least contrast to most contrast: achromatic, monochromatic, analogous, trichromatic, split complementary, complementary and double complementary. This order moves from consonance (or harmony) toward dissonance (or discord). Moving toward dissonance builds more overt complexity, while in moving toward consonance, a work becomes subtler with less complex contradiction. It moves toward unity.

In the visual realm, there are more contrasts than just the hue contrasts of the color schemes. One of the most thorough color theorists on this topic was Johannes Itten. In his definitive text *The Art of Color*, Itten dedicates an entire chapter to contrast languages that have great power. In his list of contrasts, we have value contrast, hue contrast, saturation contrast, simultaneous contrast, contrast of extension, and temperature contrast, and though he did not add it, translucency/opacity contrast could be added as well. As these contrasts increase, the complexity of contradiction increases and unity decreases.

As an example of one type of contrast, let us revisit Picasso's *The Family of Saltimbanques*.

Look at how Picasso adds complexity to *Saltimbanques* by changing the value contrast throughout the work. Overall, the composition has a rather low value contrast level, casting the figures in an ethereal haze. However, not all value contrasts are the same throughout the painting. The highest value contrast is reserved for Picasso and the lowest value contrast is reserved for Olivier — and for good reason. The act of Olivier sending the child away is

distancing her from Picasso. Olivier is dissolving in this painting as though she were in the background, but she is, in fact, in the foreground — the last place that the viewer expects the lowest value contrast. These poetic contrast changes create richness and lend themselves to a complexity that supports the content (or inner logic) of the narrative.

Unity

We now focus on Beardsley's last category: Unity, or the combining of parts and/or elements into an effective whole. The easiest discussion of unity involves building repetition within and among the formal elements (line, shape, value, hue, saturation, translucency, opacity, textures, as well as loudness, pitch, timbre, duration, and tempo). Let us look at unity on a deeper level. For more examples of unity qualities, see TABLE "Knudsen's Revised Qualities of Unity" in the appendix.

Unity: Sequential ghosting

Let's explore some organizing maneuvers that can tie all the components of a work into a whole. This idea of wholeness, or gestalt through **sequential ghosting**, is best demonstrated in the experimental animated film, *Felix in Exile*, by William Kentridge. Please see <https://vimeo.com/66485044>. Using stop-motion photography, Kentridge creates an entire film from thousands of sketches that are drawn, erased and re-drawn on the same few pieces of paper. Since the eraser marks are built into each successive drawing, each image has an essence of the preceding image, with the last image functioning as the history of the entire film. Kentridge's process is a powerful thread, profoundly tying the film together.

Great examples of art more often than not come together as a unified whole. In the big picture, complexity is not opposed to unity. Just as in the Kentridge film, a work of art can have great complexity that culminates into a well-organized whole.

Unity: Rhythm

Rhythm is a great unity-builder. In music, rhythm is often a mathematical organization of sounds into accented and unaccented beats. In the visual realm, rhythm is an arrangement within and among formal elements in repeating patterns. Note the unifying visual rhythm in the Edward Weston photograph, *Nude Floating*. When a stone falls into water, it creates wave energy that radiates as ever-larger rings outward. Likewise, the slight movement of Charis Wilson (the nude) in the water creates radiating waveforms. These waveforms, which are rhythmic, create parallel rhythms in the caustic network created by the focus and defocus of light falling across the body. A caustic network is created when a disturbed water surface acts as positive and negative lenses through which direct light passes and then rakes over something opaque—in this case, the concrete bottom and the human flesh. Though this astonishing light and water interaction is often extremely complex, it is also extremely unifying due to its inherent rhythm.



Edward Weston, *Nude Floating*, 1939, Silver gelatin print, 8" x 10". Collection of the Center for Creative Photography.

The concrete tank itself is a curve, so everything squares in an act of rhythm — light, water, concrete, and flesh.

Unity: Tonal Merging

Tonal merging is another powerful tool used in creating *unity*. Any student who was ever told to improve a figure/ground relationship by merging colors of the figure into the ground and vice versa is being instructed in the virtues of a type of part-to-part assimilation to build a unified whole. This idea can go a long way in solving many problems of disunity. For example, imagine a complicated design composed of four different complementary color pairs. Say this design

lacked gestalt. A miniscule addition of one pure color to all the other colors will make an almost imperceptible change, yet give the design a feeling that everything is now connected, achieving an essence of unity without losing the complementary quality.

Where is the greatest tonal merging in our perception of a landscape? It's in the background. There, due to optical distortion, hues and values have merged drastically and resolution is low. Mark Rothko employed this type of tonal merging throughout the entire pictorial field of his mature period paintings to create a unified mystical feel.



Mark Rothko, *No.61, Rust and Blue*, 1953, oil on canvas, 115" x 91". Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.

Rothko uses color merging very similarly to Leonardo da Vinci. (In fact, a similar Rothko/Leonardo connection was made by the historian, Marcia Hall, in a 2006 Lecture at the Savannah College of Art and Design). In Leonardo's paintings, there is a smoky (sfumato)

quality. His painting, *The Virgin and Child and St. Anne*, for example, uses softened hazy color to create an ethereal quality that emphasizes the individuals in the painting as extraordinary

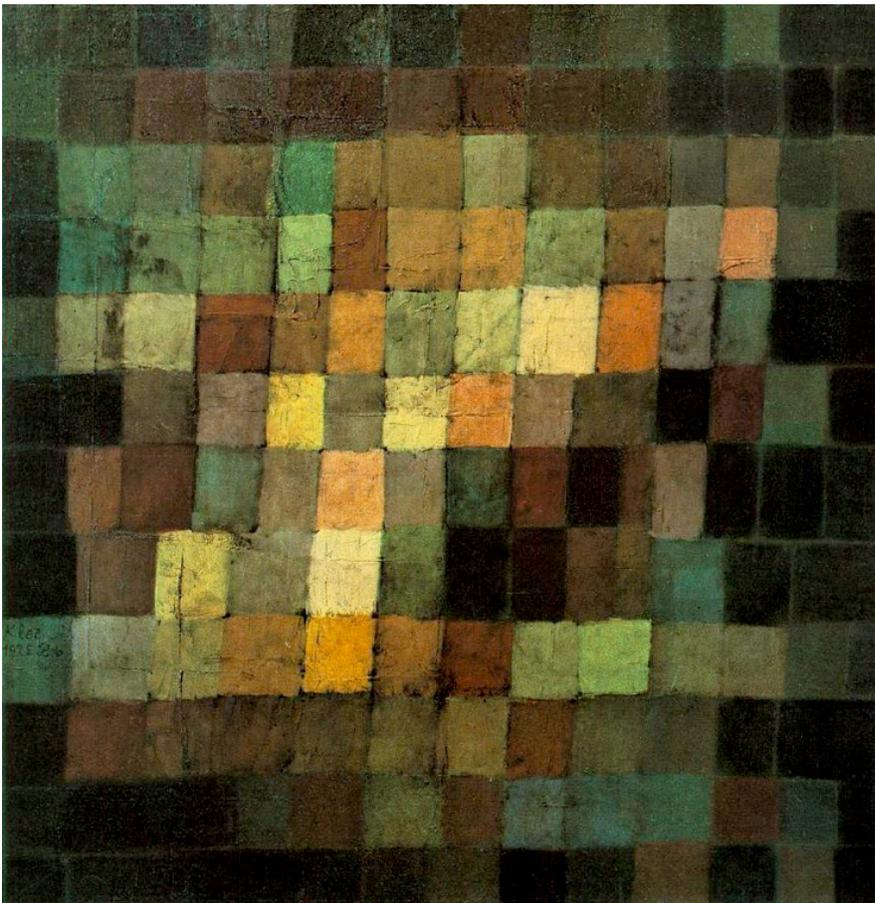


Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and St. John the Baptist*, 1499–1500, Charcoal, black and white chalk on tinted paper, 141.5cm x 104.6cm. National Gallery, London.

religious figures, beyond the normal human dimension. This color also subtly expresses movement, as in this case, the depiction of God extending into human form. Rothko's superimposed layers of color create a similar smoky quality that retains the universal mystical quality even with the narrative figures gone. A common reaction to a Rothko painting is the sensation of quiet and meditative motion.

Unity: Gradient

A gradient is another powerful tool often used to create unity. A gradient is simply the path or movement in incremental degrees from one quality toward its opposite that can produce a feeling of gestalt by guiding us from one point in the work to another.



Paul Klee, *Ancient Sound, Abstract on Black* 1925, oil on board, 15" x 15". Kunstsammlung, Basel.

In other words, a gradient is simply the path or movement from one quality towards its opposite that can produce a feeling of gestalt by guiding us from one point in the work to another. Gradients also evoke visceral engagement and complexities. As children, gradients got us down a hill on a sled, moved us through the river, and guided us on a path in the woods.

Consider Paul Klee's painting, *Ancient Sound, Abstract on Black*, 1925, oil on board. In the painting, a gradient moves radially from the center of the painting to the periphery, much like radiating sound waves. The over-all movement is from light and bright to dark and dull. Klee, even without recognizable imagery, simply by using a calculated gradient, evokes a sense of light. If a landscape painter were to bring these background color relationships into the middle ground and foreground, the pictorial qualities would be greatly subverted, but the painting would be extremely assimilated with a highly unified mystical feel, similar to a Mark Rothko painting.

Unity: Pictorial Thrusts

Pictorial thrusts (extensions) can help our understanding of compositional organization that lends to unity. Since thrusts cause the viewer to move from one point to another within an image, they increase unity. And having thrusts in a variety of directions creates complexity.



The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog by Eric Fischl. oil on canvas, 84 x 84".
Saatchi collection, London.

For example, take the pictorial thrusts at work in Eric Fischl's Post-Modern narrative, *The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog*. (See Figure 4.) Notice the horizontal thrusts of the central figure that lies on a horizontal across the canvas and the line of the three heads in the background. Also, notice the many diagonal thrusts such as those created by the wave edge, boat gunwales, and fishing rod. These important figures, edges, lines, and gazes lead the

viewer from one end of the work to the other, and help to connect parts across the work and therefore lend toward gestalt.

Principles of proximity (figures near or overlapping) and enclosure (a central figure orbited by four others) lend unity in this work as well. The extensive repetition of triangles and the repetition of the turquoise water in the turquoise cushion also unify. This sense of unity and soothing order in the painting supports the astonishing apathy shown by the figures in the face of the danger of the on-coming storm. In other words, the design in the painting supports the inner logic of the work and generates more unity, which then charges the intensity of the work as well.

In 1981, as Fischl was making *Old Man's Boat*, New York's negative attitude toward new painting engaging "our curiosity with a strong and central interest in story" was epitomized by Hilton Kramer in *The New York Times* of that year. Kramer's essay, entitled "Narrative Painting Struggles for a Rebirth," opened the discussion of the genre resurfacing but doubted it could be done with any significance at that time. Fischl quelled the doubts with paintings such as *Old Man's Boat*. Fischl took what was seen as an outdated form--narrative painting--and respectfully recontextualized it. He used it to deliver a voyeuristic contemporary spectacle that spoke (and still speaks) to the social malaise and the discontent with the supposed utopia that modernism was to bring. It resonated and made us want to look again at new narrative painting. And after looking, we could not forget.

Conclusion

Artistic virtuosity does not come easily. Nor does great art criticism and classroom critique. Sensitively considering creating a work with a balance of ICU that best delivers content with engagement is worth contemplation. Considering qualities of intensity, complexity, and unity is also a way to make art criticism and classroom critique more analytical and accessible. The ICU categories (intensity, complexity and unity) do not disappoint if explored with cause and effect detail that seeks significance.

APPEDIX

TABLE: Knudsen's Revised Qualities of Complexity

Qualities listed below seem to bear on the degree of complexity in a work of art. The list below is not complete and most of the individual qualities are possibilities and not strict prerequisites. Other qualities should be as needed.

- Variety: Multiple changes in one or more formal dimensions (such as hue, value, saturation, and/or translucency). Large differences build more overt complexity while smaller differences build subtler complexity.
- Loose Compositional Intricacies: A liberated snapshot- like composition. An example would be a painting with figures looking in a variety of directions, not looking at the implied area of focus.
- Tight Compositional Intricacies: Such as the complex parts that make up a perfect pyramidal composition
- Elemental variety: Variation in line, texture, size, and/or shape, etc.
- Over-all contrast level: Hue, value, saturation, or translucency contrast. For example, a typical Rembrandt painting, as a whole, has high value contrast.
- Variety of contrasts: Such as having both contrasting values and contrasting hues
- Variety within a single contrast: Such as having high value contrast and low value contrasts within different parts of a work
- Hierarchical Structuring: Placing greater importance on any of the qualities above, such as making one contrast more dominant than another. For example, value contrast is more dominant than hue contrast in a Rembrandt painting.
- Emphasis: Use of structuring to bring extra focus to an area.

- Artwork/ Context Contradiction: Contrast between the artwork and its contextual framework. For example, an ice sculpture has added overt complexity presented in a field of summer grass rather than a field of winter snow.
- Form/Content Contradiction: Tension between formal qualities and the theme of a work.
- Progression: Something as it moves changes into distinct new entities, such as a value gradient.
- Contrasting Gradients: A gradual progression mutating into an abrupt progression.
- Contrasting Pictorial Thrusts: For example, a horizontal log contrasting with a vertical tree in a landscape painting.
- Asymmetry
- Dissonant leaning color: Color towards a double complementary color scheme adds more overt complexity.
- Consonant leaning color: Color towards an analogous color scheme adds more subtle complexity.

TABLE: Knudsen’s Revised Qualities of Unity

Listed below are reasons that seem to bear upon the degree of unity in a work. The list below is not complete and most of the individual qualities are possibilities and not strict prerequisites of intensity. One should take liberty to add other qualities as needed.

Pictorial Thrusts: Horizontal, vertical, diagonal, etc. A way of getting the eye to move in a particular direction. For example, when a painting is composed mainly of horizontal thrusts, common in landscape paintings.

Lower Contrast: Using hue, value, saturation, translucency, and /or complementary contrast to build to a merging type of unity.

Merging Forms: Implied distinct entities such as the human form melding into one another.

Pattern: This is a type of unity that can contradict a merging unity. For example, a high contrast black and white increases pattern- unity in a checker board design more than a lower contrast gray and white.

Rhythm: A repeating pattern. In music it is often a mathematical organization of sounds into accented and de-accented beats. In the visual realm it is an arrangement within and among formal elements in repeating patterns. Complicated and/or changing rhythms versus simple and/or consistent rhythms have an extra dose of complexity, which may pull away from unity somewhat but can still be unified.

Repetition: Multiplication within and among the formal elements (line, shape, value, hue, saturation, translucency, opacity, textures, as well as loudness, pitch, timbre, duration, tempo).

Enclosure: Orbiting and/or overlapping shapes.

Proximity: Shapes in close association.

Joining Threads: Such as a melody in a song.

Gradients: The change of one step to another while adding complexity also adds unity because each step is related to the next.

Strong Inner Logic: Congruency between formal qualities and content (theme).

Golden Mean Spacing: The precise layout of shapes on an armature of a golden mean rectangle.

Artwork / Context Melding: For example, an ice sculpture has more unity with its environment in a field of winter snow than in a field of summer grass.)

Symmetry.

Consonant Color: Color towards an analogous or monochromatic color scheme adds unity.

¹Beardsley, Monroe C. 1958. *Aesthetics: problems in the philosophy of criticism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.

²Hughes, Robert. 1997. *American visions: the epic history of art in America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

³Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 193-196

Paradoxically it is both.

⁴Govan, Michael, Lecture panel deFine art, SCAD Museum of Art, February, 2013.

⁵Kant, Immanuel, and Werner S. Pluhar. 1987. *Critique of judgment*. Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett Pub. Co.

⁶Knudsen, Stephen Huffington Post, “Levitated Mass /Worth a Second Look,” May 9, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephen-knudsen/levitated-mass-worth-a-second-look/p_3242725.html

⁷Knudsen, Stephen Beyond Postmodernism. “Putting a Face on Metamodernism Without the Easy Clichés”, ARTPULSE, Spring 2013. A 2016 version of the essay with a new preface was published again in *ARTPULSE*. This is where I first suggested in a published work the need for reworking the chronology and fine tuning the nomenclature of the theory. See: https://www.academia.edu/30657211/Beyond_Postmodernism_Revisited

Also see my forthcoming PhD. dissertation, *Reimagining and Repositioning Metamodernity and Metamodernism: An Age of The Self Under Siege, an age of the Grand Mingle of Faith*

and Doubt in the onward March From the Invention of the End of the World to the Potential Inhuman to be published by Artium Publishing

⁸ Baudrillard, Jean. 1994. *Simulacra and simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

⁹Roderick, Rick video lecture *Fatal Strategies / Jean Baudrillard*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2U9WMftV40c> (found on YouTube).

¹⁰ Vermeulen, Timotheus; van den Akker, Video on “Notes on Metamodernism”, in a cultural analysis of current art practices and in review of the workshops given at A New Dawn, 2016
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WPYFvB2DIc>

¹¹Humphrey, David “Describable Beauty” 2007 *published in Blind Handshake* in 2009, Periscope; First edition

¹² Knudsen, Stephen, “Breaking the Rules of Storytelling/ A Conversation with Eija-Liisa Ahtila”, Spring 2011, ARTPULSE Magazine, and Link to interview:
<http://artpulemagazine.com/breaking-the-rules-of-storytelling-a-conversation-with-eija-liisa-ahtila>

Stephen Knudsen is a professor of Painting at Savannah College of Art and Design, and he exhibits his work in galleries and museums throughout the United States and Europe. He is a senior editor and art critic for *ARTPULSE Magazine*, and he is a contributing writer for *The Huffington Post*, *Hyperallergic*, *The SECAC Review Journal*, *Notes on Metamodernism* and the *artstory.org*.

