

# Art as a Field Phenomenon

Carlos Nóbrega  
Planetary Collegium, University of Plymouth, UK  
Universidade Federal d Rio de Janeiro, CAPES/BRAZIL.  
carlos.nobrega@plymouth.ac.uk, gutonobrega@gmail.com  
<http://www.gutonobrega.co.uk>

## The artwork as an affective game

We would like to start this communication reflecting on Marcel Duchamp's statement about the creation of an artwork. In a lecture given at the Convention of the American Federation of Arts he addressed the creative act shedding light into the complex relationship between artist, artwork and spectator (Duchamp, 1957). In Duchamp's analysis the execution of an artwork, all creative decisions "rest with pure intuition" (*Ibid.*) leaving small room for conscious intervention on the aesthetic plane. In other words, we might say that on the laborious process of transmuting matter into art objects, the assembling of parts, the handcrafting and skills are just the tip of an iceberg which encompasses the whole creative activity. The submerged portion largely corresponds to accessing "the labyrinth beyond time and space" to which the artwork resonates. It is in that sense that the artist might be thought as "a mediumistic being" (*Ibid.*) since he/she plunges into the chaos in order to visualize meaningful patterns.

But the cycle of a creative process is not complete until the dynamic structure artist/artwork/spectator is established. The artwork is like an interface which embodies the energy coming out of the artist's psychic and physical activities. We might consider it an energetic structure, an entity. According to Duchamp, the artwork is a form of catalyst of an "aesthetic osmosis" (*Ibid.*), a process that is activated between the artist and the spectator through which an "art coefficient" is transferred. As he explains:

"(...) 'art coefficient' is like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed. (...) 'art coefficient' is a personal expression of art à l'état brut, that is, still in a raw state, which must be 'refined' as pure sugar from molasses by the spectator (...). The creative act takes another aspect when the spectator experiences the phenomenon of transmutation: through the change from inert matter into a work of art, an actual transub[s]tantiation has

taken place, and the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the aesthetic scale." (*Ibid.*)

In order to unfold the aesthetic dimension of the artwork, the spectator must contemplate, participate or interact with it. He/she must engage in form of ludic game of decoding ideas, sensations and affections, a game which rules are latent in this "raw state" of art. But what does mean to be art in a "raw state"?

## A systemic approach

To attempt to answer the previous question we will suggest a distinction between artwork and work of art. The former is a set of configurations, a system, the plate of a hologram; the latter is the flow of its interlinking parts. The artwork is a piece of information; evoking Gregory Bateson's words, we may say that the work of art is "an aggregate of interacting parts or components" (Bateson, 2002, p.86), a body of ideas, part of a mental system that includes the artist, the observer and is triggered by difference. The work of art, we suggest, is the realization of a whole, and its raw state may be surveyed as a field phenomenon.

In 1978 Roy Ascott proposed a "field theory for postmodernist art" (Ascott, 1980) drawing attention to the character transactional of works of art, in which a field of "psychic interplay" (*Ibid.*) between the artist and the observer takes place, and proposed the artwork as a system.

"Art does not reside in the artwork alone, nor in activity of the artist alone, but is understood as a field of psychic probability, highly entropic, in which the viewer is actively involved, not in an act of closure in the sense of completing a discrete message of the artist (a passive process) but by interrogating and interacting with the system 'artwork' to generate meaning." (*Ibid.*)

A systemic methodology, “as opposed to the analytical approach, includes the totality of the elements in the system under study, as well as their interaction and interdependence”(Rosnay, 1979). In such a framework, the art object far from being surveyed as a final product of a meticulous labour should be understood as an element of liaison, a node. It is not instantiated to convey unidirectional information from the artist to the spectator, as Roy Ascott has attested. Also, it is not merely a sub-product of an artistic experience but an event in the world to be experienced. Based on such a systemic approach I would like to propose two epistemological movements. The first is to take into account a theoretical perspective of the artwork as a man-made organism. The second is to consider the understanding of organisms as a whole coherent system.

## Organisms as coherent systems

In her book “The Rainbow and The Worm” Mae-Wan Ho provides us a useful analogy to understand what coherence means.

“An intuitive way to think about it [coherence] is in terms of a symphony orchestra or a grand ballet. Or better yet, a jazz band where every individual is doing his or her own thing, but is yet in tune or in step with the whole.” (Ho, 1993, p.151)

Since 1974, systematic research carried out by Fritz Albert Popp<sup>1</sup> and his colleagues in many parts of the world has been focused on conducting experiments and working towards a biophotonic theory in which coherence plays a fundamental role to the understanding of organic systems. One of the main hypotheses is that biophoton, a term adopted in reference to photon emission by biological systems, plays an important biological function and due to evidence of coherence of its light, i.e., a high degree of order with an extremely stable intensity (Bischof, 2005), biophoton is supposed to operate as a biological laser, able to manage a network of information in the organism as well as to form electromagnetic field patterns.

The reason biophotonic research is brought into focus here is because it seems to provide an alternative model to the explanation of living systems. Different

from conventional thermodynamics that is grounded on the “transformation of heat energy into mechanical work” (Ho, 1993, p.154) biophotonics, in turn, takes into consideration the “electromagnetic nature of all molecular and intermolecular forces” (*Ibid.*). As Mae-Wan Ho defines, “organisms are coherent space-time structures maintained far from thermodynamic equilibrium by energy flow” (*Ibid.*, p.155).

## Conclusion

The triad artist, observer and artwork has been complexified by telematic tools which brings to the artist and also to the spectator, “a broad awareness” of the work “as systems undergoing transformations in time” (Benthall, 1972, p.39). Hence, we must look for holistic models of analysis that take into account not only the artwork as a technical object and its complexity but also the invisible flow of forces that foster its apparition. These invisible forces that arise from the creative process and manifest in the experience of the viewer seems to be constituents of a dynamic coherent field, of which flow is a vital part of an organic structure made of biological and technological parts. It is in that sense we suggest a model based on a field concept is fundamental to the comprehension of art.

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1 Cf. <http://www.lifescientists.de/index.htm>

## References

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