

Painting in the Expanded Field

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The present essay questions at the same time it acknowledges the historical and logical conditions of existence of painting as an expanded field. The expanded field of painting is presented using a Greimas rectangle that incorporates the notions of uniqueness/reproducibility, multidimensional affine spaces, and history. The essay provides an understanding of the discipline and of the art-works that make it possible to locate different artistic manifestations taking place today in society.

Today's art-world can be characterized by what, for lack of better term, is called "pluralism." The term "pluralism" designates at least two different tendencies. On the one hand, it signals the fact that there are no dominant art styles these days and that to continue searching for a pure language in any visual medium can become a fruitless task. On the other hand "pluralism" is also used to describe an attitude of "anything goes" that leaves qualitative concerns aside in favor of a kind of tolerance that accepts everything as equally valid.

Arthur C. Danto proposes that the first understanding of the term "pluralism" is the result of the changes in the art world since the 1960's. In his view, starting in that decade, the crisis of the art-object assumed widespread dominance. This was for Danto especially the case in the work of Andy Warhol, who made evident the problem with/of art. That problem is no other than distinguishing the art-object from the objects-of-the-world. When the artistic object came to be considered as neither superior nor inferior to objects in the real world but too similar to them to allow for a visual distinction (think Duchamp's ready-mades or Warhol's Brillo boxes) the difference between an art-object and an object-of-the-world escaped the sphere of the aesthetic, and of art in general, to become a philosophical problem. It was as if art had arrived to the realization of its own essence, the knowledge through art of "what art is" and, in doing so, it had come to a sort of closure (Danto. *Transfiguration* 107).¹ Art entered, then, a stage that can be called post-historic or post-modern, a stage that seemed to liberate the artist and the art-object from the functions that were suitable for them up to that point.

The second meaning of "pluralism," as "anything goes," characterizes a failure on the part of the artist, the critic, and the art world in general

to seriously engage the subject at hand, i.e., art, in order to make it play a relevant role in today's cultural debates. This second understanding of "pluralism" becomes openly political when it deals with national versus international identities from a globalized cultural perspective. In such a cultural realm the hegemonic tendency of pluralism may be interpreted as expecting a return to primitive gestures and societal mores associated not so much with Western forms of expression as with a certain exoticism that transforms the visual arts of cultures that may be different from ours into an anthropological enterprise (Foster 55). In other words, such a "pluralism" expects the Western first-world to produce art and theory, while the rest of the world becomes a province that, at best, produces art and theory limited to their own spheres of the national and, at worst, offers cultural (raw) materials to be later processed in the first-world where academic/cultural value is added.

"Pluralism," in both senses of the term, as a variety of styles available as well as an "anything goes" and neo-colonial attitude, has been recognized as a hegemonic cultural tendency, and I believe it is precisely that, *one* hegemonic cultural tendency, not a natural and a-historical state of affairs. Critics such as Hal Foster and Fredric Jameson have identified this, in appearance, free from societal and historical factors tendency as the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson), a logic based on the means of (cultural) production exported from the West to other latitudes (Foster). Robert Morgan, in turn, acknowledges the presence of "pluralism" in the art world and proposes a way to distinguish between a "symptomatic" kind of art from another he calls "significant." The former is a sort of "spectacle" in the sense given to the term by Guy Debord, a fashion-world related event rather than an artistic one, closely associated with the neo-colonial understanding of "pluralism." In contrast to the "spectacle," the kind of art which is "significant" tends to be more intimate, as well as associated to a "powerfully thought idea" (Morgan 96) which can be expressed in a variety of styles and forms. In addition, a "significant" art may also present the possibility of embodying a place of resistance against the notion that all culture is predetermined and lacks originality, and it is therefore interchangeable and necessarily ephemeral.

The myriad of styles and objects that populate the art-world, together with the tendency that accepts everything as valid and predetermined, in other words "pluralism" have given many a critic pause and impelled him/her to declare art over, even dead. Within this rather grim perspective, almost no other discipline has endured as much suspicion and negative criticism as

painting, especially in the last twenty years. Whereas it is taken for granted that art in general, and painting in particular, do not enjoy the widespread cultural resonance they had for four hundred years or so, this recognition does not, however, necessarily imply that, since almost no one is paying attention, the whole enterprise should go by the wayside.

One of the ways to avoid an early dismissal of art in general, and of painting in particular, can be found in a kind of critical and self-conscious gesture present in certain readings of verbal and/or visual texts. Such a gesture, I propose, could help locate painting in its historical and logical contexts, while also providing a way of thinking about the discipline in the current cultural arena rather than advocating or predicting its early dismissal or its death. To locate painting historically and logically I would like to trace a parallel between Fredric Jameson's reading of a literary text, Rosalind Krauss' considerations on sculpture, and my own understanding of painting as it relates to other artistic manifestations. Jameson reads a modern literary text, Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, using the Greimas rectangle in a way similar to Krauss' reading of sculpture in her, now famous, essay on the sculpture in the expanded field. I propose to use the Greimas in a way similar to Jameson and Krauss in order to advance an understanding of painting as a field which can be enriched and expanded by three elements: the notions of uniqueness/reproducibility, the expedient of mathematical affine spaces, and history. The result of the proposed understanding of painting will be an expanded field that allows us to better conceptualize the logical structure and historical development of the discipline in a "pluralist" art-world.

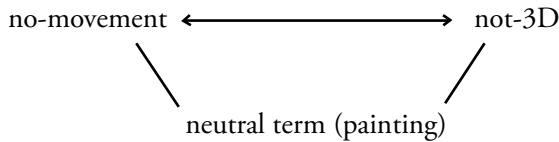
In *The Political Unconscious* Fredric Jameson studies Conrad's *Lord Jim* "not as an early modernist" text but as an anticipation of *écriture* or post-modernism (219). He does so through the expedient of a historicized Greimas rectangle, itself a systematization of the semantic space (254).² The use of the Greimas rectangle allows Jameson to get into Conrad's text by taking into account what the bipolar terms in the rectangle reveal about what is repressed in and by the text. In other words, the tension between the realized and unrealized terms of "activity" and "value" in Jameson's reading of Conrad make it possible to get into the *political unconscious* of the text and to reveal "the logical and ideological centers a particular historical text fails to realize, or on the contrary seeks desperately to repress" (49). For Jameson, the social contradictions that appear addressed and resolved by the modernist text are, in fact, an "absent cause, which cannot be directly or immediately conceptualized by the text" (82). These social conditions

addressed and repressed by Conrad's text are expressed on the one hand as an acknowledgement of the reification of daily life and, on the other, as "a Utopian compensation for everything reification brings with it" (236). The modernist text, both as ideology and Utopia, becomes perceptually more abstract and detached from its referent throughout the twentieth century and, particularly, from the 1960s on.³ When the "modernist" text strives also to stand beyond history, it becomes not just an ambivalent modernist artifact but a post-modernist one. As such, it tries to deny its historical conditions at the same time it takes history as a ruin, a field to be excavated and used as if the choices offered and taken were of no consequence other than aesthetic. "Pluralism" is another word for this denial. In opposition to the illusion of staying beyond history, Jameson reads Conrad's "modern" text revealing its conditions of existence, its social and historical grounding and that which is repressed and/or hidden by the text.⁴

The bipolar opposites organized by Greimas' semantic rectangle that serve Jameson to determine the logical and ideological dimensions of a (literary) text are also the basis for Rosalind Krauss' classic essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." Therein the notion of "historicity" appears once again, as it did in Jameson's analysis, as an element added to the Greimas rectangle. Krauss refers to "historicity" not just or not even in the sense of genealogy or lineage, but as an organizing praxis, in her case of sculpture, that can assume different logical stages over time. In sculpture, these different stages, as Krauss sees them, expand the concept of the praxis associated with the monument by confronting it with two negatives, two things sculpture is not, a landscape and a building. In her article, Krauss identifies artistic practices that call into question the status of sculpture as monument. As a result of this challenge, Krauss proposes that the notion of sculpture has grown since the 1960's, both in practical and in logical terms, to designate areas of art activities not previously recognized as associated with sculpture. Such areas include land art, marked sites, quasi-architectural pieces, and the works of artists as diverse as Nauman, Serra, De Maria, Morris, Smithson, Irwin, or LeWitt.⁵

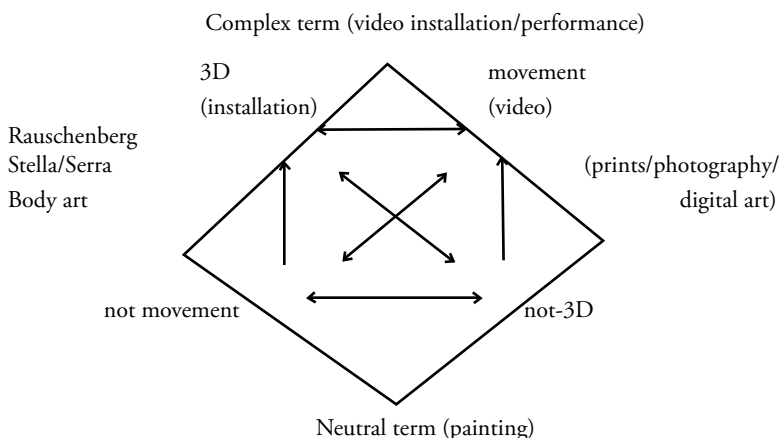
Jameson's reading of Conrad and Krauss' "reading" of sculpture through the use of the Greimas plus history reveal the conditions of existence of a text and of the cultural field where it belongs. The question before us is, what would this critical and self-conscious gesture reveal when applied to the field of painting? In other words, what would painting in the expanded field look like? And what consequences could such a "reading" of painting have for the understanding of the medium in a "pluralist" art-world?

In order to answer these questions about painting, Krauss recommends the use of the categories of uniqueness/reproducibility as the opposite binary terms within the Greimas rectangle. If one wants to sketch some very general characteristics of painting related to its status as cultural currency and to its way of circulating in the cultural economy of the art-world, the bipolar opposition Krauss proposes may be useful. But it also seems possible to consider the terms Krauss suggests not as qualitatively opposing one another but as the polar extremes of the same realm. In other words, they are not opposed to one another because they have nothing in common, but rather because uniqueness is at the other end of the spectrum from reproducibility. By conceptualizing these terms as belonging to a spectrum, we are able to accept and call for intermediate stages between these two absolutes. I would indeed like to use Krauss' uniqueness/reproducibility dimensions, but given that they belong to the same realm rather than to opposite ones, I propose to incorporate first a different pair of bipolar terms into the Greimas rectangle: three-dimensionality and movement, two aspects painting lacks. These two characteristics in their negative iterations can be organized in relation to painting as follows:



Movement and 3D are two different aspects not present in painting, since painting itself, the neutral term in the diagram, could be said to partake of none of those elements. In other words, painting, as understood in a classical way, cannot have movement nor could it be three dimensional in any relevant way, other than by having some thickness in terms of texture since, otherwise, it would enter the realm of sculpture. To the attributes painting lacks in the proposed scheme, I would like to add some contradictory (or positive) characteristics, that is to say, to consider in relation to painting artistic manifestations that *are* three-dimensional and *have* movement. In Greimas' rectangle, the proposed series of terms can be related to one another by contrary (not-3D / not-movement) and contradictory (3D/ not-3D) relationships, as well as by relationships of implication (not-movement / 3D). Combined with the aforementioned qualities, the field where painting

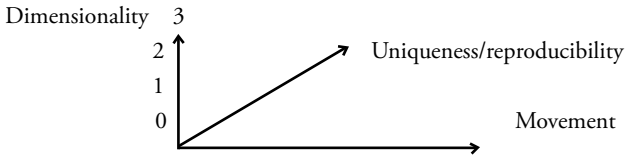
is located may then look something like the following:



According to the graph we can comprehend (in both senses of the term) within the expanded use of the category “painting” artistic manifestations that are now-a-days considered to be either unrelated to one another (body art and digital art) or downright opposite to painting, such as installation art.⁶ The proposed scheme may allow us to think of these and other artistic manifestations as parts of the expanded field of painting. I am thinking, for example, of photography, which shares with painting the characteristic of being non-3D and of having no movement while, at the same time, being related to video, a medium that presupposes movement, by way of its images and by the way video is captured in photographic frames. I am also thinking of installation, which appears at the opposite end of painting in the scheme proposed, but at the same time explores some of the same issues painting does, i.e. space, color, composition, and the like. The proposed ways of thinking of painting in a field based on relations between the characteristics of 3D and movement can be enriched and expanded by adding three more elements to the mix: (1) Krauss’ notions of uniqueness/reproducibility; (2) mathematics’ affine spaces and (3) history.

1. Uniqueness/reproducibility. I want to incorporate Krauss’ concepts of uniqueness/reproducibility to a scheme based on three-dimensionality and movement. Thus, “movement” and “3D” will be placed in a three-dimensional plot, with axis x, y, and z standing for: movement (x), dimensionality (y), and uniqueness/reproducibility (z). The space created by the axis

becomes, in turn, three-dimensional:



Being independent of one another, these variables can help locate different points in the defined space as the sum of three coordinates: $A = (x, y, z)$. In such a realm, any work of art related to the three axes here proposed can be thought of as possible within this model and, thus, in some way related to painting.

2. Affine space. The fact that an art-work could be defined in terms of three space-coordinates can be limited and limiting, since these coordinates and the space they define do not accommodate the transformations art objects and experience in the hands of artists, the public, galleries, museums, curators, critics, and the art-world in general. To give but one example, the experience of seeing a Van Gogh retrospective in someone's house is not the same as that of seeing it among myriads of people in a cloudy Sunday afternoon at the Metropolitan. One can even venture to say that the works themselves are not the same ones, in the sense that the viewing experience is so different from one venue to the other. To cope with this and other kinds of the limitations implied in the 3-axis plot defined above, what is needed is the addition of the possibility of shifting places, of seeing the expanded field so far proposed not as a static space, where points are located in isolation, but as an environment where change is not only possible but continuously taking place. Such an environment can be thought of as a vector space or as what mathematicians call a multidimensional affine space.⁷

Conceiving the expanded field of painting as an affine space allows for the shifting of positions from point to point to point, which is nothing short of the possibility of continuous transformations of the elements of the group, in our case, art-works. The group-elements can be identified as static whenever one wishes to stop them in order to see their status at the moment of observation. Such a freeze of the field comes at the expense of momentarily putting aside its continuous shifts and transformations. Body

art, for instance, can be seen as an isolated artistic manifestation, at the expense of severing it, albeit for a moment, from painting, movement, and 3-D, not to mention from other potentially enriching manifestations such as dance or sacred rituals, manifestations that can be accommodated in the expanded field here proposed.

3. History. Adding a historical element to the proposed field and to its logical nature, as Jameson and Krauss did in their studies, I would like to venture that “painting” has been “giving away” throughout history some of the territory it carved for itself five centuries ago, if not before, and that this “expansion” is witnessed by different forms and media prevalent today. Narrative, for instance, has been taken over by the video, while the importance of “seeing” and of “being there” seems to have been passed on to the realm of the installation and performance art, where the actual space is an important component of the piece. The “message,” if ever was such, has been emptied from the painted piece and taken over by the critics, or the artists themselves, as a verbal activity, parallel and not necessarily related to the art works being produced. This dilapidation of the meaning and means of painting over the last centuries need not necessarily herald the end of the discipline nor even its closure. This dissemination may point instead to a second wave of freedom for painting (the first one being the advent of photography and the movies), as well as to a sharing of painting’s former visual monopoly with other art-forms we find in the context of an expanded field, where means of artistic expression considered to be in opposition to painting or to one another need not necessarily remain in a contentious situation.

The expanded field of painting, as presented in this essay through the expedient of a Greimas rectangle that incorporates the notions of uniqueness reproducibility, multidimensional affine spaces, and history, performs a gesture similar to those of Jameson and Krauss on their respective “texts”: it questions at the same time that it acknowledges the logical and historical conditions of existence of the medium and the texts or, in our case, the art-works. As I noted before, the resulting field also relates painting to other artistic manifestations previously seen as different or even opposite to this discipline. By making evident the conditions of existence of the medium, the expanded field allows the art-works to be “embodied” meanings, not just representations of meanings imposed from the outside in a sort of a-

historical fashion. **Being historicized and logical, the expanded field is not, however, all-inclusive and non-critical.** In other words, it is not “pluralist” in as much as this term is identified with an “anything goes” (as long as it sells) attitude, more related to the world of the spectacle and of fashion than to a kind of art that is intimate and powerfully thought.

This expanded field makes it possible to locate different artistic manifestations taking place today in society. In turn, the proposed way of thinking about painting makes room for the reinvestment of the medium with the currency it has lost/lacked for some time now. The expanded field also affords the possibility of transformations and movements in one or more dimensions at the same time, shifting from one form of expression or given object to another, and even expects the possible addition of new visual dimensions. In this regard, to quote but one simple example, the advent of computer-generated art is just a shift away in the field from painting, photography, and/or reproducibility. Moreover, the proposed field is still open to new and original artistic manifestations, alerting us to the existence of new potential artistic dimensions and to new ways of recognizing and navigating them.⁸ These new ways are not, however, opposite to painting but, together *with* painting, are part of an expanded field as it has developed historically. Thinking of painting in these ways preempts the early dismissal of the discipline and/or its premature death at the same time it calls forth and celebrates a “pluralism” that is critical and politically non-oppressive, as a type of Utopia already taking place in our midst.

Notes

¹ Danto proposes that a similar development takes place in Hegel’s aesthetic, where art is an instrument for the full manifestation of the Spirit and, once the Spirit has reached that objective, as in the case of modernism, art loses its goal that is taken over by philosophical inquiry.

² **The model Greimas proposed is an adaptation of an early formulation, also called a Klein group when employed in mathematics, or a Piaget group in the human sciences.**

³ Granted, the push for a disembodied eye, for an observer and consumer of images rather than an actual body that looks at them, had been evolving for quite some time, particularly since the mid-nineteenth century, and especially since the advent of photography and the multiplication of images and image-making machines (Crary 12). This disembodied eye, rightfully criticized by Duchamp as the realm of the “retinal,” still needed “embodied meanings” (Danto 181), i.e. art works, to contemplate. The “des-embodiment” of painting is very much in vogue still, specially in the digital realm where painting has become a virtual experience, to the point that some critics can say that the next Whitney Biannual, for instance, might as well be virtual the next time around (Rush 43).

⁴ For Jameson such a historical reading is equivalent to the Lacanian Real, that is to say, to the horizon that subsumes the text and that is, as in Lacan's case, non representable.

⁵ Another term Krauss uses for this expanded field is . . . "postmodernism" (Hertz 224).

⁶ As but one example of the complex relationship of the neutral term to the rest of the field, the critic Robert Storr, talking with the Russian installation artist Ilya Kabakov, states that "installation may save painting, rather than kill it" (125).

⁷ In his *Erlanger Programme* (1872), Felix Klein formulated geometry as the study of a space of points together with a group of mappings (the geometric transformations that leave the structure of the space unchanged). Theorems are then just invariant properties under this group of transformations. Euclidean geometry is defined by the group of rigid displacements; similarity or extended Euclidean geometry by the group of similarity transforms (rigid motions and uniform scalings); affine geometry by the group of affine transforms (arbitrary nonsingular linear mappings plus translations); and projective geometry by projective collineations. There is a hierarchy to these groups: Projective > Affine > Similarity > Euclidean. As we go down the hierarchy, the transformation groups become smaller and less general, and the corresponding spatial structures become more rigid and have more invariants. Projective geometry allows us to discuss coplanarity, and relative position using the cross ratio or its derivatives. However in standard projective space there is no consistent notion of *betweenness*. For instance, we can not uniquely define the line segment linking two points *A*, *B*. The problem is that projective lines are topologically circular: they close on themselves when they pass through infinity (except that infinity is not actually distinguished in projective space—all points of the line are equal). One solution to this problem is to distinguish a set (in fact a hyperplane) of points at infinity in projective space: this gives us affine space. What this means for our topic is the possibility of transformations in the *in betweenness* realm between two, in principle, distinct artistic manifestations. I am indebted to Dr. Eugenie Hunsicker for having introduced me to the mathematical models used in this article.

⁸ New dimensions such as temporality or audio, for instance, could be added to movement, 3-D and uniqueness and, if fact, are being added all the time in performance or installation pieces, where the elements of time and sound are as important as the visual ones.

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