

The Art of Answerability: Dialogue, Spectatorship, and the History of Art

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In “Semiotics and Art History,” Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson argue for a construction of art history that is grounded in the contextual presence of the viewer or spectator, noting that “the text or artwork cannot exist outside the circumstances in which the reader reads the text or the viewer views the image, and that the work of art cannot fix in advance the outcome of any of its encounters with contextual plurality” (179). Our paper explores the *contextual plurality* that constitute art history as a discipline by examining the dialogic relationship among the artist, artwork and spectator. Specifically, we examine the conceptions of the creative act by two 20th century thinkers: Mikhail Bakhtin and Marcel Duchamp.

Bakhtin’s Answerability

Mikhail Bakhtin is Russian theorist and scholar whose major writings revolve around the concept of dialogue as an active connection between art and life. Bakhtin’s concept of the dialogic nature of text (i.e., the unfixed quality of the text that is never closed-off in advance but is always open to interpretation) is particularly apt for describing the strategies of many contemporary visual artists who seek to destabilize the authority of the text in cultural discourse. Except for Deborah Haynes’s 1995 study *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts*, Bakhtin’s ideas have not been discussed in relation to contemporary art in a significant fashion.

One of Bakhtin’s earliest texts is a short essay entitled “Art and Answerability.” In this text he posits the necessity for an active answerability on the part of the reader or spectator, which serves to animate and bring the work of art to life. In other words, art comes to life when actively experienced by the spectator. Throughout his work, Bakhtin argues for an active engagement with works of art, in which readers and spectators “must become answerable through and through.”¹ As applied to the visual arts, it is not simply that we are answerable for viewing, but more importantly we must be responsible in our response to what we view. In this manner, Bakhtin not only posits the responsibility of the author/artist, but also requires a spectator who responds and is part of the dialogic exchange that is the artwork. For Bakhtin, there is not work of art without the active engagement of spectators.

In “Art and Answerability,” Bakhtin posits the necessity of an “inner connection” between a person and artwork that he terms the “unity of answerability.”² It is through the answerability of the spectator – the embodied response of individuals – that the artwork is given life and takes shape. However, answerability as Bakhtin conceived it is only possible through the embodied experience of the exterior world by the subject, a concept that Caroline A. Jones’ has termed the sensorium. In addition to visuality, she states,

we should begin to reckon with the auditory, the olfactory, and the tactile as similarly crucial sites of embodied knowledge. The resulting set of experiences can be called a *sensorium*, the subject’s way of coordinating all of the body’s perceptual and proprioceptive signals as well as the changing sensory envelope of the self. The sensorium is at any historical moment, shifting, contingent, dynamic, and *alive*.³

What is at stake in the concept of answerability, specifically in relation to the visual arts, is the potential of each individual to shape an embodied exterior world; for Bakhtin such answerability is not restricted to the one who creates, but is open to be created by the artist *and* the spectator in dialogue.

In “Bakhtin and the Metaphorics of Perception,” Michael Gardiner argues that each of us in response to the exterior world “is animated by a dynamic impulse to ‘sculpt’ or transform the discrete elements of this object-world into coherent and meaningful wholes.”⁴ This dialogic response to the world that surrounds us exists in the potentiality of our response to it, not as a pre-existing state of affairs that is fixed and immobile. Instead, as Bakhtin states, the artwork is a world that is animated and “lives only by coming into contact with another.”⁵ This concept of answerability is therefore key to positing an active and responsive spectator who activates the artwork through creative understanding.

Duchamp’s Creative Act

Bakhtin’s conception of answerability is surprisingly similar to Marcel Duchamp’s conception of “The Creative Act.” For Duchamp, the spectator literally brings the work into contact with the external world; more importantly, he believed it was the responsibility of the spectator to decide if the artwork would become part of art history. In other words, even the incorporation of works of art into posterity was dependent upon this interrelationship of artist and spectator.

Let us consider two important factors, the two poles Duchamp in his polemic text “The Creative Act” designates as responsible for and integral to the creation of art: these are “the artist on the one hand, and on the other the spectator who later becomes the posterity.”⁶ Duchamp argues that each of these two poles or, as I discuss them, these two subject positions in relation to the work of art function as dual parts of the same process, which he refers to as the *creative act*.

Duchamp first presented “The Creative Act” in April 1957 at the meeting of the American Federation of the Arts in Houston. Due to the fact that his argument directly challenges the artist’s authority – specifically by undermining the privileged position that the artist occupies as singular author and creator of the art object, as well as artistic ‘genius’ in the reception and historicization of that object – the text has consistently met with resistance. This “little essay,” as Calvin Tomkins refers to it, “is wickedly subversive” because of the fact that Duchamp positions the artist as a *medium*, with “the spectator a virtual co-partner in the creative process.”⁷ Duchamp clarifies this position in his interview with Pierre Cabanne, where he states:

I believe very strongly in the ‘medium’ aspect of the artist. The artist makes something, then one day, he is recognized by the intervention of the public, of the spectator; so later he goes on to posterity. You can’t stop that, because, in brief, it’s a product of two poles – there’s the pole of the one who makes the work, and the pole of the one who looks at it. I give the latter as much importance as the one who makes it.⁸

In other words, rather than creating an artwork that is experienced *by* a spectator after it has been created, in Duchamp’s description the artist is positioned producing works of art in virtual partnership *with* the spectator. The work of art therefore cannot be created

without the participation or partnership of the spectator – or the posterity (multiple spectators in multiple contexts) that the singular spectator represents.

This interrelationship that Duchamp delineates between the artist and the spectator can be seen reflected in a number of theoretical debates concerning the role of the author in written texts, most notably Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author" and Michael Foucault's "What Is an Author?" Similar to the manner in which Duchamp discusses the role of the artist as a 'medium', Foucault examines "the author as a function of discourse," a process that he aptly terms the 'author-function' – a concept that locates the subject within the fluid function of the 'author'.⁹ Foucault's author, like Duchamp's artist, is not a figure of singular unity or subjectivity from which the text is produced and takes its authority, but instead the author/artist as a function is representative of the split subject whose actions are separated from the results of their efforts. And it is through this process that Foucault makes clear the manner in which the text/artwork "apparently points to this figure who is outside and precedes it," because it is the reader/spectator who enables the function of the author/artist to be defined.¹⁰ Stated simply, the author/artist functions to make something that is experienced by a reader/spectator – or, more generally, by the Other – that the text/artwork points to and in fact requires for the completion of the creative process.

Like Bakhtin, Duchamp saw the role of the spectator as an active one within the formation of the work of art. Rather than an artist creating an artwork that is experienced by a spectator after it has been created, in Duchamp's description the artist is positioned producing works of art in virtual partnership *with* the spectator. The work of art therefore cannot be created without the participation or partnership of the spectator – or the posterity (multiple spectators in multiple contexts) that the singular spectator represents.

Conclusion

Bakhtin's creative understanding or answerability can in this manner be seen as analogous to what Marcel Duchamp argues in "The Creative Act," specifically when he states that the role of the spectator "is to determine the weight of the work on the esthetic scale;" this necessarily means that the "creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act."¹¹ Both Bakhtin and Duchamp argue for an active form of spectatorship that posits an equally active and answerable history of art, a historical perspective that is not fixed in advance but is responsive to the spectatorial encounters that it initiates. To return to Bal and Bryson's statement, "the text or artwork cannot exist outside the circumstances in which the reader reads the text or the viewer views the image, and that the work of art cannot fix in advance the outcome of any of its encounters with contextual plurality."¹²

¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Art and Answerability," *Art and Answerability*, eds. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 2.

² Bakhtin, "Art and Answerability," 1.

³ Caroline A. Jones, "The Mediated Sensorium," *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 8.

⁴ Michael Gardiner, "Bakhtin and the Metaphorics of Perception," *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual*, eds. Ian Heywood and Barry Sandywell (London: Routledge, 1999), 50.

⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences," *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 163.

⁶ Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, eds. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Da Capo, 1973), 138.

⁷ Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Owl Books, 1996), 397.

⁸ Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1987), 70.

⁹ Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980), 124-125.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹¹ Duchamp, 140.

¹² Bal and Bryson, 179.