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The Structure of the Art Historical Time: A Kublerian Approach

My research is focused on the emergence and development of the cognitive discourse in the study of art. I am trying to put in perspective the present re-framing of aesthetics and art history in terms of cognitive science, which provides several contemporary fields of humanistic inquiry with a master narrative (Spolsky, 2004; Lopes, 2019). A narrower objective is to frame the question of the nature of art appreciation so as to incorporate both its cognitive and historical features. To this end, I am looking at theoretical achievements in art history that might prove useful for the psychology of art. There are a number of empirically oriented art historiographies that engage with psychological questions regarding appreciation while taking into account its temporal dimension.

In my presentation, I will dwell on George Kubler's theoretical model for representing the art historical time, with a focus on the place of ancient American art and its reception within this temporal model. My contention is that working within Kubler's framework offers a good point of entry to the problem of historicity of cognition. Recently, there has been a revived interest in Kubler, mostly with respect to his conception of non-linear time segmentation and his reliance on naturalistic explanatory systems (Reese, 2014, p. xxvi).

With respect to the problem of time segmentation, Kubler uses "sequences" and "series" as a model for studying the organization of art forms as discontinuous in time and space, independently of meaning (1962). Works of art are treated in networks of relationships, in the context of earlier and subsequent works of art. Several questions arise in relation to the proposed segmentation of the art historical time: what exactly is being assessed in this process of connecting art works in history? If an artifact is part of a temporal series or sequence, do we appreciate what binds forms together rather than works of art in isolation (1962, p. 40-41)? Is the causal context preceding a work elicited in experience, in the immediate appreciation of a work of art? To whom applies the rule of appreciation by series? Is the contemplation of formal sequences part of a layperson's engagement with art or is it a pleasure for the art historian alone (1962, p. 40-41, 8, 11; 1965, p. 300), given that he may be the only one capable of discerning the contour of shapes in time and revealing the artistic

problems that a sequence of artifacts seeks to solve (Focillon, 2002, p. 119; Kubler, 1962, p. 30, 49)? Is this experienced segmentation of time (Kubler, 1967, p. 850) ultimately just another name for stylistic analysis?

To approach the question of appreciation, which will be my main concern, I propose to look at how Kubler engages with naturalistic modes of explanation while connecting scientific methodologies to humanities and refusing thus to clearly delineate the subject matter of areas of knowledge as distinct as anthropology, psychology, empirical aesthetics and art history. Aesthetic appreciation appears as a shared subject matter, with a firm anthropological and psychological basis; in Kubler's terms, there is a "continuum of aesthetics embracing all possible experience and emotion" (Kubler, 1991, p. 195-196), by which it is implied that "all artifacts are deserving aesthetic attention" (1991, p. 109). And this continuum can be illustrated with a case study, namely, the unsteady aesthetic response to ancient American objects (Kubler, 1991, p. xv-xvi) and their emerging "aesthetic recognition" (where recognition is understood both as knowing again and as acceptance, (1991, p. 15-16). The aesthetic recognition of ancient American artifacts occurs in time (1991, p. 197-198), broadly after 1840, when historians of art such as Kubler start to acknowledge the importance of studying the artifacts their full visual presence. Aesthetic recognition appears thus as a historically contingent category. This example serves well picturing what Kubler calls an "aesthetic stratigraphy" (Kubler, 1991, 12), concerned with layering or arranging on a timescale the successive stages (or strata) in the history of aesthetic thought.

Finally, I will briefly present my own version of aesthetic stratigraphy, which consists in including the movements within art history themselves within a periodization scheme, with a focus on representative figures of what I call "cognitive histories of art". I will further elaborate on a history of aesthetic thought that is not object-based but process-based, providing insight on the cognitive foundations and temporal nature of appreciative practices.