

Aesthetic Investigations

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Notes on Conceptual Art

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INTRODUCTION

by Edward Winters

Jeffrey Steele is a British Artist who works within the constructivist and post-constructivist tradition. In Europe that tradition has its roots in, and is sustained by, groups of artists including, Art Concret, Zero, de Stijl, Russian Constructivism, Structuur, and other twentieth century avant-garde movements concerned with the physical structure of the work as content. It thereby rejects depictive content as superfluous to that structure. Nor are these groups attracted to expressionism as an alternative content. Rather, they assume the autonomy of the work and deny or suppress the egocentric position of the artist. Certainly, for Steele, the idea of the artist as an exciting and excited wanderer, outside of society and, through his genius, able to provide us with unique perspectives upon our condition, is to romanticise the artist and to marginalise him even as he is lauded. Not all artists insanely cut off their ears and grant us a vision of their loneliness.

In 1966 Steele took part in *The Responsive Eye* at New York's Museum of Modern Art. The international show also exhibited works by Josef Albers, Ben Cunningham, Larry Poons, Frank Stella, Ad Reinhardt, Bridget Riley and Victor Vasarely. Steele spent three weeks in New York, staying at the Chelsea Hotel, and he met and spoke with many of the city's artists and theorists. It was during this period that he visited Andy Warhol at The Factory where they discussed the nature and status of Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*.

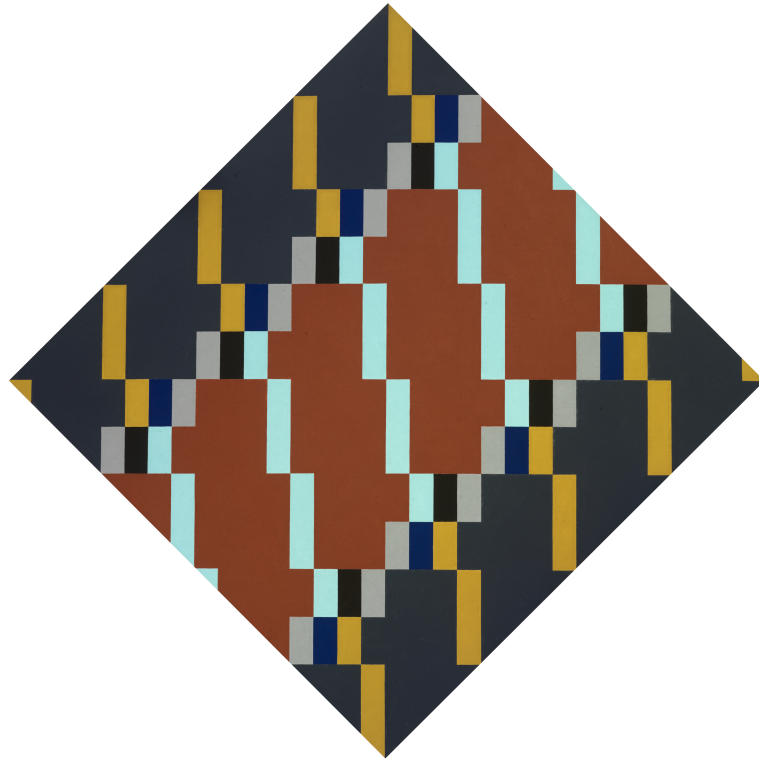


Figure 1: *Syntagma Sg IV 118*, 2005, Oil on flax canvas, 146 x 146 cm. Copyright Jeffrey Steele, courtesy of Osborne Samuel.

The Responsive Eye was curated by William Seitz and a half-hour film of the same title was made by Brian de Palma showing the works in the context of the opening night, where Steele was interviewed along with other artists together with a protracted interview with philosopher/psychologist, Rudolf Arnheim.¹ In that film, the architect Philip Johnson, at that time a collector of both Bridget Riley and Jeffrey Steele, responded to a question regarding Op Art: ‘No, I don’t call it “Op Art”, I think it’s perfectly ridiculous, I bought a Bridget Riley long before it was Op Art—that was an invention by American journalists.’ He goes on to say that the best title for this work is the exhibition title. Otherwise how could you have Albers sitting alongside work that relies for its effect upon *moiré* patterns. (Much if not most of the work in the exhibition relied upon these patterns.)

Steele distanced himself from Op Art, not least because Op Art, as the name suggests, relies upon optical illusion—and illusion is something that concrete artists were decidedly against. Having rejected pictorial space as illusionistic, the physical structure of the work was to present itself as the object of attention. In an interview in the film, Steele states, ‘The logic is important. The sensation is important, but only so in that it engages the attention.’

With the distance established between his work and Op Art, Steele proceeded with his wife, Anja Nenonen, to mount the *Systeemi* exhibition in Helsinki in 1969. This in turn led to the formation of the British Systems group of artists who worked together until the mid-seventies and who later showed together informally. In the mid-seventies Steele was showing with the Dutch avant-garde gallerist Reikje Swart in Amsterdam and with Lucy Milton in London.

Regarding the artist as engaged with society, rather than peripheral to it, Steele taught theory and practice of fine art. He was engaged in theory and published in major fine art journals.² In 1984 he was to contribute to the International Workshop on the Theory of Art in Caracas, a meeting that brought him into contact with philosophers, Arthur Danto, Stanley Cavell and Stephen Toulmin.

I would like to add that I was a student of Jeffrey Steele in the mid-seventies at both Portsmouth Polytechnic and at The Slade School of Fine Art; and I am grateful for the manner in which he taught us and in which he instilled in us a great respect for art and a sense that art really matters; and that its theory engages with other disciplines in which we might better conceptualise our practice. What follows are Steele's thoughts on a range of matters concerning the nature of his art in the wider context.

Edward Winters, London, May 2016



Figure 2: Stanley Cavell, Jeffrey Steele, Luis Castro-Leiva, Caracas Workshop, 14th December 1984. (Photo: Gloria Carnevali. Reproduced with permission.)

I. CONCEPTUALITY AND AESTHETICS AN APPROACH TO A THEORY

By Jeffrey Steele

The thing to avoid, I don't know why, is the spirit of system.
(Samuel Beckett).³

Here I shall have nothing to say about the technical aspects of my work as a painter. But this work is not separate from the everyday *Lebenswelt*, as some would have us believe, but is part of it. My opinion or 'views' about my specialist assignment will, to be sure, be better informed than those of my neighbour. But my discourse as 'an artist personality in society', if it is to be effective, is not permitted to pull rank. It must survive all manner of competitive encounters at the theoretical level if it is to be allowed to continue.

This is the sense in which I claim that every artist, in order to *be* one, must already have developed a competent sociological theory.

Konsequenz

The industry for authenticating works of art insists on having, for every object offered for sale, a name, a date, and a provenance. Thus opening up a field for a secondary industry in fraudulent attributions.

This is one reason why the establishment of reliable chronologies is important.

But there is also a Proustian sense in which the antiquarian concept of chronology is rearranged, so that the events of the wasted time are transposed into a zone that is itself outside time. Proust reminds us several times that his work is a construction.

In 1960 when I painted my first ‘hard edged’ geometric paintings, some friends asked: ‘why are you painting pictures that belong in the 1930s?’

My newest painting, dated 2016, was already fully conceptualised (in the limited sense advocated by Sol Le Witt) by the end of 1960, but did not rise to the top of my preferential agenda for execution until quite recently.

Well into the 1920s Claude Monet was adding NEW practical and conceptual information to the quintessentially nineteenth century political history and metaphysics of impressionist art, long after its cultural ‘impact’ seemed to have been fully assimilated or even superseded.

In 1947 Thomas Mann published *Doktor Faustus: Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn, erzählt von einem Freunde*.

In 1949 he published *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus. Roman eines Romans*.

Entstehung: a key concept.

Fictionalisation

We are asked to consider ‘Conceptual Art and its Legacy’. Alfred Jarry’s Ubu was derived from his physics master at the Lycée de Rennes in 1888, Monsieur Hébert.

‘Pere Ubu’ and ‘Ubu Roi’ could fairly be considered to be part of the legacy of Monsieur Hébert.

But what about ‘Alfred Jarry’?

The worlds of art and of philosophy may or may not intersect, but, undoubtedly, both are intersected by a third and more powerful one, which is the industry for popular entertainment, sport and show business.

Jarry made a cultural intervention of historic importance which has its origin in a schoolboys’ prank, and, if we look closely there is a ‘clowning’ or ‘court jester’ element everywhere to be seen, going right back to the Greek Sophists of the fifth century B.C.

René Descartes

Just as comedians are counselled not to let shame appear on their foreheads, and so put on a mask: so likewise now that I am to mount the stage of the world, where I have so far been a spectator, I come forward in a mask. (René Descartes).⁴

‘I have spent the whole day shut up in a stove-heated room, (...)’⁵ Descartes’s Descartes identifies himself as a professional soldier aged twenty-three at the time. (1618) It is not until part four in my edition that Descartes comes to the ‘Cogito’ which he first approaches in a double negative form: ‘I could not feign that I was not.’

A genuine epistemological crisis seems to arise at this point. It is the *personage*, and not the ‘real’ (?) Descartes who has been proved to exist. Then there is a logical sense in which the writer’s existence is negated. At the same time, (‘dans un seul et même mouvement’) Descartes demonstrates his real belief in the existence of a reader—recipient of his idea.

Paul Cézanne

Central to my concern is the body of written work that has accumulated around the conversations and letters of Paul Cézanne (1839—1906).

The critical year is that of Emile Zola’s novel *L’Oeuvre*, 1886.

Cézanne’s shock, and indeed his grief at this event, is well documented.

Zola’s personage, Claude Lantier, is taken as having been modelled on Cézanne himself, but there is an irreconcilable abyss between these two conceptualities, both as they apply to the ‘artist personality in society’ and, more importantly, to the work programme of the artist in the context of a professional milieu, which includes that of the younger Claude Monet mentioned above.

I suggest that it is in this ‘clash of conceptualities’ that the need for subsequent art practices to incorporate a more self-consciously theoretical element, first made itself felt.

I have claimed that Cézanne is an important *epistemologist*, but by this I do not mean that he ‘epistemologises’ at the easel in the way that some people have claimed that Beethoven ‘philosophises at the keyboard’.

In his book (see, *infra*) Daniel Herwitz calls Naum Gabo ‘Constructivism’s Descartes’, and I do not mean that either.⁶

Rather, I refer to sentences such as the following quotations from Cézanne’s letters to Emile Bernard: (23 Octobre 1905)

Or vieux, 70 ans environ, - les sensations colorants, qui donnent la lumière sont chez moi cause d’*abstractions* (emphasis added) qui ne me permettent pas de couvrir ma toile, ni de poursuivre la délimitation des objets quand les points sont tenus, délicats, d’où il ressort que mon image ou tableau est incomplete. (Paul Cézanne).⁷

And, (26. Mai 1904):

Le littérateur s’exprime avec des abstractions tandis que *le peintre concrète* (emphasis added) au moyen du dessin et de la contour ses sensations, ses perceptions. (Cézanne).⁸

Note that Cézanne uses the word ‘concrète’ as a verb: ‘concréter’, as innovatory and awkward in French as ‘the painter concretes’ would be in English.

There is a French verb ‘concrétiser’ but Cézanne seems deliberately to have avoided using it.

Every word of sentences such as these is charged with philosophical meaning, and these meanings do not translate readily from one language to another.

And so my claim is that Cézanne’s propositions deserve to be studied and compared to those of Descartes and his commentators, which address the same problematic.

I know that this ‘prise de position’ irritates many philosophers and I would defend it not merely with reference to the literature which it has engendered but, in the present context, as the point of emergence of the need for a self-consciously elaborated category to be called ‘Conceptual Art’.

Cézanne’s promise: ‘Je vous dois la vérité en peinture et je vous le dirai’ is printed on the outside cover of my ‘Edition critique présentée par P. M. Doran’, Macula, Paris, 1978.⁹

I am irritated in my turn when Jacques Derrida exploits the slogan on the outside of the book, and instead devotes his own book of the same title to diverting my attention to irrelevant matters.¹⁰

Reception

The best analysis of my work to date has not come from any source in art history, art education or art criticism. It was written by a young student of Linguistics, Sandra Hoffmann, under the supervision of her tutor Karina Türr ‘in der Philosophischen Fakultät I (Philosophie, Geschichte und Sozialwissenschaften) der Friedrich—Alexander Universität Erlangen—Nürnberg’, in 1992.

It is not a doctoral dissertation but a *Magisterarbeit*, and it was well-received, but Sandra told me that she had no intention of pursuing an academic career.

Two excerpts are relevant here:

REZEPTIONSMÖGLICHKEITEN Grundsätzlich läßt sich Steeles Werk auf zwei Ebenen rezipieren, Visuel und Konzeptuel, wobei sich diese beiden auch durchdringen können. (Sandra Hoffmann).¹¹

And

Die Differenz, die Max Imdahl zwischen ‘veritas aesthetica’ und ‘veritas logica’ ansetzt, *lehnt Steele ab*. (Hoffmann, p. 61. Added emphasis).¹²

Imdahl had written (this time I translate):

However many illuminating things may be said about an artwork—the attempt to theorise art or the essence of art is like the attempt to theorise the untheorisable. (Max Imdahl).

Imdahl's essay is called, '>Op<, >Pop< or the always coming to an end History of Art', and the book: Jauß 1968. Jauß is best known for his later elaboration of an influential, but also contested theory of aesthetic reception.

My refusal of Imdahl's proposition, restated positively, is the 'core proposition' subtending my work as an artist. Put quite simply, it seems to me that a clear process of abstract thinking should lead to a satisfying visual Gestalt. In formulating this proposition two philosophers have helped me greatly:

The first is Max Bill, (1908—1994), particularly his essay, 'Art as non-changeable fact'.¹³ The other is Jean Piaget, (1896—1980), e.g., his assertion: 'It is intellectually intolerable to admit that there exist two kinds of truth, for logic requires their coordination.'¹⁴

Atteggiamento

In her very closely argued essay, Carolyn Wilde defines Conceptual Art:

Conceptual Art can be seen as one particular *stance* (added emphasis) within the tradition (of Fine Art), a stance (...) particularly related to its own times. (Carolyn Wilde).¹⁵

The word 'stance', chosen from amongst all its possible cognates—'When Attitudes Become Form'—suggests an heroic 'prise de position' against some recalcitrant force.

Confrontational. . .¹⁶

'Stance' is good because it marks a perfect intersection of synchrony and diachrony.

Cézanne was fond of the word 'Tempérament!' In his usage it implies an irreducible charge of competitive antagonism, without any lapse into destructive warfare.

Kriegszustand

In the first serious philosophical writings on art—perhaps the first writings in which art is so much as recognised as such—a kind of warfare between philosophy and art is declared.

When art internalises its own history (...) it is perhaps unavoidable that it should then turn into philosophy at last. And when it does so, well, in an important sense, art comes to an end. (Arthur C. Danto).¹⁷

Arthur Danto is perhaps best known for his claim that, with Marcel Duchamp the aesthetic drops out of the definition of art.

In his book entitled, *Anywhere or Not at All*, Peter Osborne, places Danto's contribution in the context of Postconceptual Art. Its second chapter entitled, 'Art beyond aesthetics' is required reading here.¹⁸

For my part, and putting it very crudely, I find that the attempt to emancipate art from its historic relationship to an aesthetics of beauty, so far from

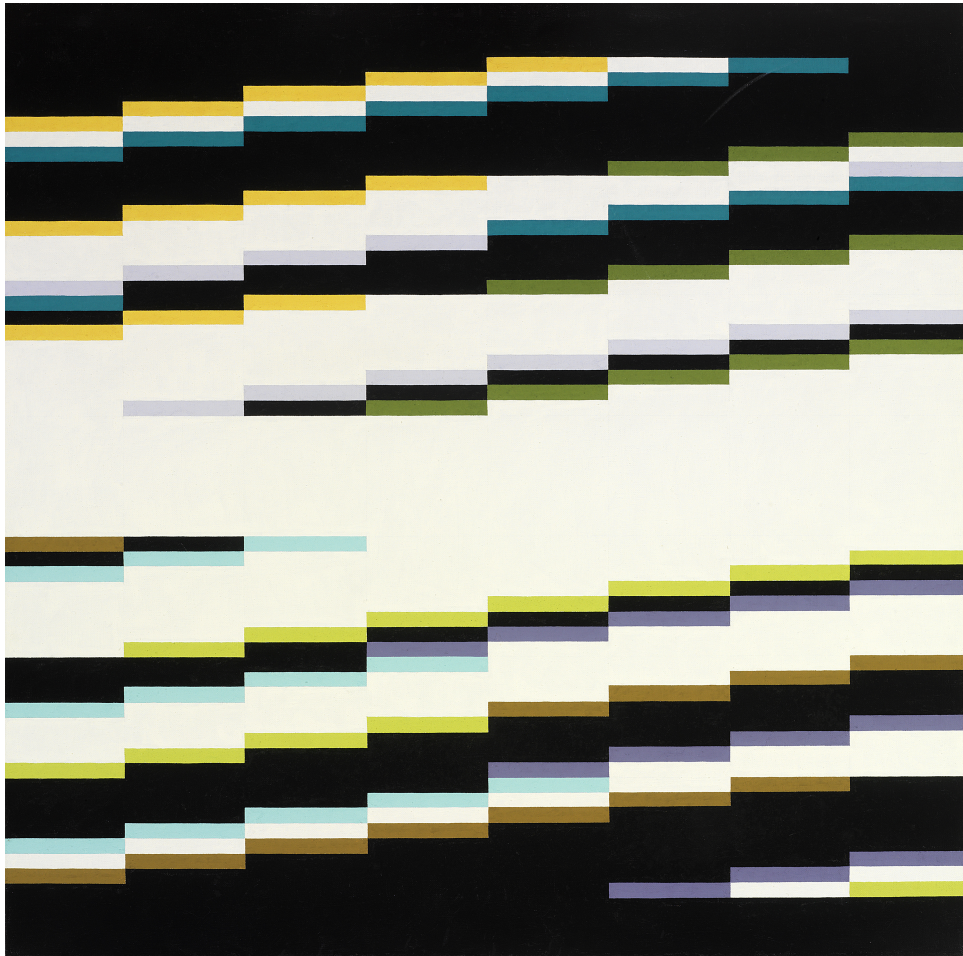


Figure 3: *Syntagma SG III 104*, 1992, Oil on linen, 61 x 61cm. Copyright Jeffrey Steele, courtesy of Osborne Samuel.

yielding ‘an art without aesthetics’, leaves us merely with an art of miserable aesthetics, and so I find myself in disagreement with theorists such as Osborne.

But much more urgently, I am moved to reject the diversionary violence implicit in the following assertion by Stanley Cavell:

[I]t no more counts toward the success or failure of a work of art that the artist intended something other than is there, than it counts, when the referee is counting over a boxer, that the boxer had intended to duck. (Stanley Cavell).¹⁹

Cavell’s suggestion, as with that of Danto, is that we are already on a war footing, and we can see this in the photograph above.

But because of the neuroticised conditions of the conflict, it is very difficult to identify the main issue which is at stake.

Aside from masochism, there is a question about why I have wanted to insist on presenting the photograph at the head of these notes, for it clearly shows me being knocked out of the ring by the philosophical champion, Stanley Cavell, at the Venezuela conference.

It stands as a case of attitudes becoming form.

A ‘conceptual attitude’ might, after all, be considered as another name for an ideology.

Theorists of ideology, from Marx to Althusser, and via contributions from Gramsci, Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno and others, have shown that ideologies cannot easily be encapsulated in any stable propositional form, because they are always, in Althusser’s sense, *overdetermined*.

A few moments before the photograph was taken everything had seemed to be sweetness and light, and so I have been curious, ever since, about the causes of the explosive situation that ensued. Such is the degree of attachment (cathexis/*Besetzung*) that joins each participant to his or her assigned role in the debate, that the *mauvaise foi* that Jean-Paul Sartre associated with all such social role-playing is exposed, and an unpleasant animal substrate comes into view.²⁰

The exact location and the implications of the aesthetic referent, of aesthetic value, and of my personal likes and dislikes may seem to be matters of marginal importance: ‘some people just don’t like strawberries’, ‘*De gustibus non est disputandum*’ . . .

But

There is a real sense in which all philosophical—and indeed political—problems ‘bottom out’ into problems of aesthetics.

Aesthetic referents are systematically used to justify the exercise of political, and of course also military, power.

Given the state of ‘martial law’ decreed a priori in this case by Danto, it was perhaps entirely necessary for me to lose this particular skirmish, conducted about a concept of beauty espoused by Cavell and, for that matter, by Clement Greenberg, about which I am sceptical.

I like to hold onto the hope that something resembling Friedrich Schiller’s *On The Aesthetic Education of Man* might eventually prove to be both possible and practically feasible, but for this to happen certain tenets must be regarded as critical objects for discussion: both rational and, in principle, intelligible.²¹

Regarding the Caracas Conference itself, it has already prompted one interesting book, mentioned above, and, given the time, I should one day like to write another. Daniel Herwitz calls it ‘that magnificent event’, but I would go a little further than that.²²

In order to bring these notes to a conclusion I have found myself reliving and reconstructing the events of that December morning in Caracas:

All of the participants were asked to prepare a paper for discussion, but I am the only artist to have done so.

I have not yet had time to through-read all of the other papers which have been declared by our chairman, Stephen Toulmin, ‘taken as read.’

Nobody has.

Nor have I read Stanley Cavell’s book, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969) in which he asks, ‘How can fraudulent art be exposed?’

But yesterday I watched him playing the Grand Inquisitor, interrogating my friend Carlos Cruz-Diez, who seemed to be puzzled by Cavell’s motivation.

Danto’s paper ends: ‘(. . .) There has been a recent attempt to deconstruct philosophy by treating it as though it were art!’

Yes. Exactly so.

I suspect that Cavell and I would agree to disagree with Danto, that philosophy is satisfactorily to be classified as an art among other art forms.

I have shown the group a 35mm slide taken from Monet’s *Gare Saint-Lazare* (1877) to demonstrate that the ‘coloured patches’ which, following the English philosopher Bernard Harrison, I was calling ‘homogeneous colour presentations’, could be the objects of *rational* analysis and discussion.

This seems to have been well received, and I relax.

But why is Cavell now going on about coffee blenders and wine tasters?

The photograph makes this clear.

My rejoinder was intemperately expressed but, more importantly, it flies in the face of much cherished ideologies regarding the sublime talent that great artists are supposed to PERSONIFY.

A skilled rhetorician, Stanley Cavell has provoked an explosion of conflicting Conceptualities.

What I actually said seems, in itself, to be harmless enough, although obviously it requires qualification:

‘No! There is just one world and artists see it exactly the same way as everybody else!’

Stephen Toulmin ruled that I had become overexcited, and that this statement should be struck from the record.

But only now do I realise that, at that moment, I was identifying Stanley Cavell with my old adversary José Ortega y Gasset who, in 1925, published a text which, ever since I read it circa 1960, I have found to be objectionable from every conceptual point of view:

From a sociological point of view the characteristic feature of the new art is [. . .] that it divides the public into two classes of those who understand it and those who do not. This implies that one group possesses an organ of comprehension denied to the other—that they are two different varieties of the human species. (José Ortega y Gasset).²³

It was surely unfair of me to attribute Ortega’s position to Cavell, but I am now in a position to schematise the questions that remain at stake:

- 1.1 In what ways are an individual's aesthetic responses socially accountable and intelligible?
- 1.2 In what ways might these judgements be considered as ineffable?
- 2.1 Is there such a thing as 'aesthetic competence'?
- 2.2 If so, is this a faculty innate in the individual?...
- 2.3 ... or is it rather the object of a collective and organised educational process?

Portsmouth, 25th June 2016

NOTES

1. See URLs.
2. See his website for publications and biography (see URLs).
3. Beckett 1965, 291.
4. Descartes 1971, 3.
5. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method II*.
6. Herwitz 1993.
7. 'Well, old, 70 years approximately,—the coloring sensations that give the light, are with me causes of *abstraction* (emphasis added) that do not allow me to cover my canvas, nor to follow the delimitation of the objects when the points are kept, delicate, from which it emerges that my image or plane is incomplete.' Translation: Rob van Gerwen.
8. 'The writer expresses himself with abstractions while *the painter concretes* (emphasis added) by way of design and of the shape his sensations, his perceptions.' Translation: RvG.
9. From Conversations ... 'I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you'. Translation: RvG.
10. Cf. Derrida 1978.
11. 'Basically, Steele's work can be received at two levels, visual and conceptual, where both can penetrate each other.' Translation: RvG.
12. 'The difference that Max Imdahl posits between "veritas aesthetica" and "veritas logica", *Steele rejects*.'
13. Bill 1968.
14. Piaget 1972, 79.
15. Wilde 2007.
16. Antagonismes was the title of an exhibition organised by Julian Alvard at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, in February 1960, which was decisive in my development.
17. Arthur C. Danto, 'The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art', a paper given at the International Workshop on the Theory of Art, held under the joint auspices of the International Institute of Advanced Studies, Caracas, and the Museum of Modern Art, J. R. Soto Foundation, Ciudad Bolívar. Danto's paper was read on a sunny day in December 1984 in the hills overlooking Caracas. The paper was developed into his book of the same name.
18. Osborne 2013.
19. Cavell 1976, 181.
20. Sartre 1943, 82–90.
21. Friedrich Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen, in einer Reihe von Briefen*, 1793.
22. Daniel Herwitz, op. cit., p. xiv, declares that he takes his entire book to constitute a 'defence of Danto's confident application of his grand narrative.' (p. 11).
23. Ortega y Gasset 1948.

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URLS

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- Interview with Rudolf Arnheim:
http://ubu.com/film/depalma_responsive.html (accessed on 18th May 2016).