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## On the very idea of a “language of art”. Aesthetics and psychoanalysis

### Abstract

*In a number of writings that were only narrowly circulated, Richard Wollheim took a stand against two pivotal theses often at the center of aesthetic reflection and, even more often, of critical and historical-artistic practices: i) that art is a language (and thus artistic meaning is conveyed in the same way as linguistic meaning); ii) that art inherently is a form of communication. What motivates Wollheim’s deep aversion for i) and ii) depends on the progressive liquidation of the experience of what lies at the center of art, i.e. the object intentionally produced by the artist. This is of immense relevance in Wollheim’s psychoanalytical conception of the mind because the art-object allows the reparation urge to take place making concrete and externalizing the inner world of the artist. The emphasis on the singularity of the object excludes art from the domain of communication: because (one) communication presupposes a specific audience – a rare circumstance in the case of art; and (two) the emotive content of the work cannot be transmitted via language since emotions do not correspond isomorphically to emotion terms. To diminish the object at the center of the experience of art (or the experience itself) means no less than to abdicate to an essential part of human nature.*

### Keywords

*Richard Wollheim, Psychoanalysis, Communication.*

Received: 15/07/19

Approved: 13/10/19

Editing by: Eleonora Caramelli

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*In loving memory of Eva Picardi,  
maestra ed amica, immernoch.*

## 1. Introduction

This paper is strictly connected with a previous article and develops the line of analysis of Wollheim’s work there exposed. In that occasion (Maistrello 2017) I examined a group of Wollheim’s writings that were only narrowly circulated on the alleged (and very frequent in contemporary art-criticism) identity of art and language: Wollheim 1989, 1996 [= APAL] and 2001a [= FPO]<sup>1</sup>.

The inquiry in Wollheim’s arguments brought a series of results against the identification of art with language: generally, he tends to re-awaken a set of objections he raised to Nelson Goodman during their twenty-year exchange, since Goodman can be legitimately considered the most rigorous defendant of the idea that i) art is a language, that is that works of art are symbols in a symbolic system, and, consequently, that their meaning is produced and conveyed in the same way as linguistic meaning), and ii) that art is inherently a form of communication. Methodologically, Goodman’s approach to philosophical problems finds in the notion of explication the systematic tool capable to overcome the difficulties raised in ordinary language and to substitute the confused concepts originating in common sense – “that repository of ancient error” – with others, even if this operation implies the change of their extension, whether partially or fully. Whereas Goodman’s work can be located in the tradition of the ideal language school that, even before Carnap, dates back to Frege and Russell, placing Wollheim’s thought in the ordinary language philosophy is definitively less straightforward, since his approach is more nuanced and various. However, Wollheim shares with the ordinary language philosophers the conviction that common sense is “the criterion, the yardstick of philosophical criticism” (1953: 646).

The relevance assigned to common sense makes Wollheim’s philosophical orientation and methodological strategy somehow close to de-

<sup>1</sup> Wollheim 1989 appeared on “Art Issue” is now collected in Wollheim 1993, to which page numbering I refer in what follows; FPO was originally delivered at a conference at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies on 29th September 1994 and published in 1995; a new revised edition is now in Wollheim 2001; APAL is a contribution to a multidisciplinary seminar on the status of image, which reprises certain key points from earlier contributions.

scriptivists, in particular Peter Strawson’s descriptive metaphysics<sup>2</sup>. However, the profound attention Wollheim’s approach devotes to experiential traits deriving from the acquaintance with the work of art has brought to use, quite correctly, the label “descriptive phenomenology” to characterize his philosophical enterprise (see Eldridge in his *Foreword* to the new edition of Wollheim 2015 [= AO]: ix). It is this philosophical position that Wollheim opposes to the most robust incarnation of i) and ii), that of Goodman’s (1968), capable, among other things, to individuate, for each art, the typical syntactic and semantic peculiar traits, which is also what distinguishes them from the symbolic system of language. However, in the group of articles mentioned, Wollheim presents the proposal constituted by the theses i) and ii) as including a much broader spectrum meaning “structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, hermeneutics, what might be thought as ‘mainstream’ semiotics, and certain versions of cognitive science” (Wollheim 1993: 185).

Even in the most charitable reading of the equation art-language (meaning in the association of, say, a painting with a sentence so that the indispensable Frege’s context principle may be fruitfully applied), the end result is that the inherently indeterminacy of paintings provides no criterion that allows deciding which one of many possible sentences – all equally well-fitting the pictorial representation – is the correct counterpart of the painting. Due to his emphasis on the conventional nature of language and on the inherently stratified and highly hierarchical character of linguistic rules, Wollheim’s approach to philosophy of language has been recently charged with being entirely regulative and strictly combinatorial, a mathematical exercise that leaves no room for “any innovation, invention, creativity or imagination in our usage of language” (Bermejo Salar 2013: 106). Such accusation has been backed with a reference to Donald Davidson’s thought which, as known, “rejects the idea that it is part of the essence of language to be governed by rules of meaning and by conventions of various kind, to which speakers feel bound in their behaviour” (Picardi 1994: 25). It is partly within the frame of Davidson’s theory that the assimilation of art to language has been recently refreshed precisely on the basis of a “common sense intuition” (Bermejo

<sup>2</sup> Such proximity appears clearly in those passages of AO where it is discussed the ontological status of those arts that, admitting of multiple instances (as literature), invites the postulation of a type: a question, according to Wollheim, “entirely conceptual” which means “a question about the structure of our language” (AO: 52).

Salar 2013: 103-5), thus following the widespread usage currently practiced from the most part of art-historians and art-critics.

My previous article was chiefly devoted to demolish any idea of con-traposition between Davidson and Wollheim: on the contrary, as seen, the latter was well informed of the theses of philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and action theory of his department colleague at Berkeley and from his beginnings. The conception of language defended by Davidson (at least in the first part of his career) emerges as Wollheim’s main weapon against Goodman’s identification of art and symbolic system since his first analytical commentary on *Languages of art*. Most notably, in his criticism on Goodman’s thesis of the unbreakability of predicates – pivotal in maintaining a radical symbolic approach to visual arts – Wollheim implicitly used the Davidsonian idea of “semantical primitives” remarking that “by permitting what is in fact the introduction of an infinite number of prime locutions into language the thesis [i.e. Goodman’s] offends against the basic requirement of teachability” (Wollheim 1974: 299). In this paper I try to make clear why Wollheim finds so misleading – and dangerously misleading – the assimilation of art to language, especially as correlative to the thesis that art is a form of communication. In this sense, arguments against the prevalent equation of art and language are also used to demolish the corresponding doctrine which reduces art to a function of a larger communication pattern.

## 2. *A polemical target (or two?)*

In the group of articles here considered, Wollheim recapitulates some of the arguments used to contrast Goodman’s strictly semiotic-symbolic stand in order to take the phrase “language of art” not just in the spirit, but in the letter, with a different and more insidious target in mind, namely what he considers to be one of the most brilliant applications of such model to an artwork: Yve-Alain Bois’ reading of Picasso’s cubism.

According to Yve-Alain Bois (1992), Picasso’s cubism took a semiological turn as of 1912. As a general strategy Wollheim focuses on the inconsistencies that, in his view, flaw Bois’ proposal: in particular, he notes that it is surprising to conceive of artworks, and, what is more, artworks by a single artist, as some times working as a language (*post* September 1912), and other times not (*ante* September 1912). It is even more surprising that Bois does not provide any systematic method to divide the examined paintings so as to individuate a pictorial syntax, nor does he

propose categories that are somewhat analogue to grammatical categories so as to classify these elements and apply rules able to connect such basic elements into more comprehensive units, or useful to discern which pictorial objects conform to such rules and which do not.

The conclusive observations of APAL (which in some passages literally repeats FPO) move along similar lines, stressing that even if one were to trace a syntax in the painting, such syntax would not be sufficient to account for the pictorial meaning in the same terms as linguistic meaning, since the latter results from both the syntactical structure and the non-syntactic linguistic vocabulary – something that has no parallel in pictorial representation. It is true that Bois, in a footnote, explicitly distances himself from the search of distinctive units in painting that may account for the same combinatory nature and creativity that characterize natural languages, and indeed openly recognizes that it is precisely the pursue of such an analogy that blocked the application of semiology to painting. However, following Eco 1970: 28-31, Bois still considers it legitimate to continue speaking of painting as “a ‘kind’ of language, that is, a code” (Bois 1992: 202, note 48). This is the reading that Wollheim focuses on in the latter part of FPO, once he has dismissed the syntactical conjecture.

In truth, the analogy art-code had already been discussed in AO, § 56: 88, where Wollheim clearly asserts that “a code may be defined as the representation, or mode of representation, of a language [...] with, of course, this proviso: that there is not a one-one corresponddence between languages and codes”, that is why “semaphore would be an example of a code”. “Any such enterprise, – according to Wollheim – in so far as it goes beyond mere suggestion or metaphor, rests upon the assimilation of art to a diminished version of language, and hence to a diminished version of itself” (AO, § 56: 89, italics added). The polemical target of *Formalism* is the so-called diacritic nature of the sign, that is, the fact that, *à la* Saussure, a sign has no value in itself, but receives its meaning by difference and contrast (that is, negatively) through the relation that obtains among all other signs of the system it belongs to. It is precisely on this intrinsically contextual and opposing nature that Bois founds the pictorial and representational meaning of the artworks he discusses, in order to validate his chronological scanning of the cubist movement. He employs precisely the image of the traffic light, in which “the red light means ‘stop’ only because it is opposed to the green light, meaning ‘go’ (blue as opposed to yellow, or black as opposed to white could have had exactly the same function)” (Bois 1992: 173-4). Bois

takes such an example from another participant of the Picasso seminar, Rosalind Krauss (1981), one of his most influential colleagues, which Bois repeatedly quotes in his talk (cf. also Krauss 1993: 151; see de Saussure 2011: 84). Wollheim objects that such a model is not sufficient to produce meaning tout court: indeed, when observing a traffic light one need to first know what is the meaning that must be assigned to “red” and to “green”, in order to correctly proceed or stop: one cannot just sit there waiting for something to happen (inside or outside one’s head) and suggest the right course of action<sup>3</sup>. Bois, and Krauss with him, are therefore confusing the consequence of meaning with its foundation, and this is precisely Wollheim’s criticism in APAL: the *semiotic* elements Bois envisages in the course of his contribution on Picasso are such only by virtue of what they visually represent. In other words, once representation is understood *according to the right visual experience*, categories are first *perceptually* recognised and then *semiotically* assigned in the correct manner. There is nothing bad in this, and Wollheim himself recognises that at times certain structural traits, so inferred, “may amplify, or reinforce, or modify, pictorial meaning” – as in “the magnification of the figure in Byzantine or Romanesque art: or the use of lapis lazuli in the depiction of the Virgin’s robe” (APAL: 41; cf. FPO: 134-5; *Painting as an art*: 22). Wollheim’s point is rather that such elements are not by themselves sufficient to give rise to and to account for the pictorial meaning, since they leave out visual *experience* (that is, the recognition of the painting’s subject through perception) precisely when the latter becomes crucial. In other words: given that any semiotic theory admits of the role of perception of the painting’s surface in order to apply those rules and conventions that allow to grasp what is represented, even when the most extreme theories (allowing that they exist)<sup>4</sup> are discredited, those that accept the recognition of the subject, of its elements etc., exclude the role of perception and let pictorial meaning to be ex-

<sup>3</sup> This remark has a very Wittgensteinian flavour. Cf. *Philosophical investigations*, § 85: “A rule stands there like a sign-post. – Does the sign-post leave no doubt open about the way I have to go? Does it shew which direction I am to take when I passed it; whether along the road or the footpath or cross-country? But where is it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one?”. See also § 198. See Voltolini 1998: 85-91.

<sup>4</sup> Goodman 1972: 122-3 abandons the idea of an unbreakable predicate, keeping only the notion of one-place predicate: this entails that, even for a “radical” symbol theorist, pictorial representations depict something only if this “something” can be recognised in them (cf. Lopes 1996: 44; 68-70).

tracted solely from the application of those rules and conventions. In Wollheim’s view this leads (at the most) to the mental representation, to the thought of the meaning of the painting, not to its experience, which is, first and foremost, visual. Semiotic theory, even at its best, does not save the pictorial phenomenon.

Wollheim’s aim should now be clearer: he wants to show that mainstream art-critical positions are inconsistent and untenable, not so much in relation to a supposedly worked out and verified (*analytical*) idea of language, but in relation to their own roots in the structuralist and conventionalist traditions. That is, Bois’ consideration of a painting as a system of signs and his insisting that his use of “sign” is rigorous (Bois 1992: 302) remains, in Wollheim’s view, entirely undemonstrated. It must be said, however, that Bois is very precise indeed in his use of terms when it comes to quoting Saussure, Barthes, Jakobson; moreover, he displays great familiarity with structuralist and post-structuralist literature. Indeed, Bois’ thesis is effectively encapsulated in a convincing passage where, using Peirce’s technical vocabulary, he maintains that “Picasso, throughout Cubism, has been exploring the *elasticity* of iconicity”, but from a certain point onward – specifically, when he got hold of a Grebo mask in 1912 – his works started to be realised through “the combination of two categories of signs – indices and symbols – and what had been for centuries the most important semiological category in painting, that of the icon, is almost entirely skipped”. Picasso came thus to conceive of painting as “a network of signs which asserts their polysemy, that it is produced by an array of structural oppositions which undermines the possibility of any simple relationship to a referent” (Bois 1992: 177). Such a tendency, in Bois’ view, marked the whole of Picasso’s life, and his greatness, even after Cubism, thus lies in his being a structuralist, both for what concerns his “sustained interest in the semiological transubstantiation of signs” and his “lifelong insistence on the *serial* nature of his work” (Bois 1992: 194).

Wollheim admits that his extrapolation of Bois’ position is partly illegitimate, since Bois certainly did not aim at elucidating the nature of pictorial representation tout court but to illuminate (successfully) the internal development of Cubism, which moved towards an increasing level of abstraction. Yet, Wollheim does proceed in this sense precisely because the cleverness of Bois’ account (as acknowledged in FPO: 134 and in APAL: 37) may end up setting one of those traps language has in store for everyone – as Wittgenstein could say.

In response to Bois’ huge bulk of semiotic theory, Wollheim invokes “the substantial positive understanding that we have built up of how paintings in fact acquire meaning”, “the understanding that we do have of how paintings acquire meaning” (FPO: 134; APAL: 39), that is, simply, common sense and experience. The foundation of pictorial meaning must be sought in the proper combination of what can be seen in the representation, that is, the spectator’s *visual experience*, as the actual result of the maker’s intention. It is significant that *Pictures and language* ends thus: “We all know all of this from childhood, and theory needs to go back to school”. Theory – art-theory in particular –, in other words, must go back to rely on experience and its distinctive phenomenology, as it is described by psychology within the constraints and the findings of philosophical analysis.

Both in *Art and its objects* and, to an even greater extent, in *Painting as an art*, Wollheim has spent his best energies to put psychology back at the center of our explanations of what is crucial in art experience. So, we might say, in these papers he is, “in a sense, making propaganda for one style of thinking as opposed to another” (Wittgenstein 1967: 28) addressing an audience he considers to be “held captive of a picture”, that of “language of art”. However, it would be still possible to emphasise the experiential trait of language (“the experience of meaning”, as Wittgenstein calls it, which may be crucial in poetry and literature) and play down its conventional element, and thus construe a refined model that may be generalised to all arts, including the visual ones, and that may preserve the analogy between linguistic and artistic meaning, and thus that between art and language.

Some have indeed moved in this direction and, drawing from the solutions found in the philosophy of ordinary language, have stressed the kinship between the perlocutive or illocutive dimension of linguistic meaning (borrowing from Austin) and the experience of an artwork (Novitz 1975, 1977; Wolterstorff 1980; Bermejo Salar 2013); some others, using tools in the Gricean tradition (like the distinction between speaker meaning and sentence meaning), have tried to adapt them to the case of depiction (Abell 2009; Blumson 2014). Wollheim completely rejects such alternatives, for what concerns both visual and literary arts – though he focuses on the former. The radical indeterminacy<sup>5</sup> envisaged

<sup>5</sup> Such emphasis on the indeterminacy of the content of a picture might appear in contradiction with the conceptual (hence determinate) holding needed to grasp the content of a painting (the Wollheimian “cognitive stock”, see below); however “in insisting



in the structure of pictorial representation does not disappear if one considers the painting as a speech act: Courbet’s superb oil-on-canvas *The sleepers* – which is imbued with the same, though subtler, eroticism as *The origin of the world* – may be assimilated to the sentence “Two women lie in bed together” as one may find in a grammar book, or use to describe what happens in a certain room, or to provoke sexual arousal, or to point to the dangers of lust – which are all different linguistic acts.

Moreover – and this is something that applies to literary arts too – different speech acts may bring about the same outcome, the same experience, thus appearing as entirely equivalent. Art, however, is not “an instrument for producing in us sequences of feeling”, as Wittgenstein (1958: 178) already pointed out, arguing for the need to avoid a mistaken hypostatization of private experience even in aesthetics. If that were the case, a pill or a drug would do equally well, and thus Wittgenstein prefers to talk about aesthetic reactions, thus capturing both their immediacy and their tight correlation with a specific object.

However, we might perhaps identify a specific class of speech acts as a particularly fitting paradigm to support the analogy between linguistic and artistic meaning – a class of speech acts whose felicity conditions are, for the sake of the argument, identified with the obtaining of a specific experience. We might, for instance, following Bermejo Salar (2013), pick the class of witty remark as a relevant model – a proposal that Wollheim himself took into consideration due to its Freudian character and its potential in aesthetics (see Wollheim 1974: 202-19). Even then, such a model might *perhaps* apply to literary arts, but it would certainly not work for visual arts. Preliminarily, it is worth noting that saving the analogy requires the somewhat outrageous recovery of the notion of “author’s intention”, that is, exactly what both Goodman and Barthes, for entirely different reasons, deem “unreal”<sup>6</sup>.

that thought, conceptual thought, can bring about changes in what we see in a surface” does not mean, according to Wollheim 2001b: 24, “taking sides on the issue whether the experience of seeing-in has a conceptual or nonconceptual content. Tasting soup has a non-conceptual content, but, if we are prompted conceptually about what is in the soup, the soup can taste different”.

<sup>6</sup> In Goodman’s view, this is because his super-extensionalism admits only of the functioning of the symbolic system to explain and understand the artwork, and summoning intention violates the correct irrealism about mental content. In Barthes’ view, the notion of “death of the author” first relies on the broad undermining of the role of biography and context, in favour of literary *functions* and, at a later, post-structuralist stage, goes hand in hand with the development of the notion of *text*, which emphasises the role of automatism and of unconscious combinatory, as well as the politically

As it is well known, Wollheim considers instead artistic intentions – “desires, beliefs, emotions, commitments, wishes, that the agent has and that, additionally, have a causal influence on the way he acts” (Wollheim 1987: 8) – as an essential pivot of one’s aesthetic report or, more generally, as an immediate, *commonsensical* corollary of “the natural human tendency to understand all artefacts in terms of the intentions of the artificer, unless there is some overwhelming reason to the contrary” (APAL: 33). Even if Wollheim himself does not find the term “intention” entirely adequate, his conception of intention and its role is one element of major difference with the Gricean animated explanations of depiction, and more generally, art<sup>7</sup>. Whereas in Abell’s and Blumson’s accounts recognition of artist’s intention is a necessary condition (along with convention or resemblance) to understand the picture, this is not so in Wollheim’s account: “If the spectator has, in front of the picture and caused by it, the experience that the artist intended him to have, this is enough. There is no reason why recognition of the artist’s intention should have to play a part in this causal story. The spectator’s experience must concur with the artist’s intention, but it does not have to do so through knowledge of it” (Wollheim 1987: 96). Wollheim’s account is above all *experiential* and recognition of artist’s intentions do not warrant the intended experience, *if* it is really feasible to speak of artistic intentions so crudely. Artists’ intention is characteristically at the intersection of more intentions not of the same order (AO, § 59) and criticism, in Wollheim’s phrase, is retrieval *not* of the intentions of the artist, but of the creative process, i.e. the intentions which actually terminate on the work and insofar as they successfully do so through the actual work in the relevant medium. That intentions are not entirely transparent to artists themselves is an extremely important feature that Wollheim tries to preserve resorting to Donald Davidson’s ideas, not just in the philosophy of language but in action theory<sup>8</sup>.

revolutionary idea of the abolition of the author (as a reflection of the market) and of the artwork as a fetish (as the author’s “private property”). The Anglophone tradition too has taken for granted the ruling out of the author’s intention as a key to the artwork’s meaning, starting with T.S. Eliot and the *New Critics*, as well as Wimsatt, Beardsley 1946.

<sup>7</sup> Considering artistic depiction as a communication problem is another one (see below § 4).

<sup>8</sup> One should remember that, according to Davidson 1984: 127, “interpreting an agent’s intentions, his beliefs and his words are parts of a single project, no part of which can be assumed to be complete before the rest is”. I do not pursue here the

Davidson’s findings in the field of action theory show that “the reasons for which an action is performed may be said to be its causes, and that employing teleological notions to describe behavior is not in antithesis with, or an alternative to, employing causal notion” (Picardi 1992: 19); and, Wollheim 1993: 94 approvingly insists that “the significance of this now obvious-seeming point is due to the work of Donald Davidson”. In this theoretical framework unconscious motives are accepted and (*pace* Wittgenstein) treated as *both* reasons *and* causes: one can therefore have a reason – an efficient reason, if described from the causal point of view – to act in a certain way, without this reason having to be connected with the overall system of ideas, beliefs, wishes of the artist/agent in a logically appropriate manner.

### 3. *Analytic aesthetics and psychoanalysis*

Not even the welcome reintroduction of intention can obliterate a distinctive trait of art, says Wollheim: namely, all speech acts (as those recalled earlier in relation to Courbet’s painting), however different in terms of context and of the experience they aim at producing, are always *tokens* of a same statement *type*. This points to a crucial discrepancy between art and language, and thus between artistic and linguistic meaning, for “we do not think of pictorial works of art as tokens of certain type-pictures: we think of them [...] always as particulars existing in space and time. Or at least we do so within art. With road signs or logos is different. But we do not think of pictorial works of art as tokens of given types” (APAL: 29; on seeing-in – the supposed natural faculty which should account for representations – see Wollheim 1987; an accurate exam of seeing-in problems can be found in Lopes 1996 and Voltolini 2013; 2015).

The Strawsonian (i.e. descriptivist) vocabulary implicit in such consideration should not hide that, to be sure, Wollheim is here insisting, *contra* Strawson (1959: 231, n. 1; 1966: 5-13) on the commonsensical, “superficial point” that paintings, as well as sculptures, are *essentially*, and not contingently (“because of the empirical deficiencies of reproductive techniques”, *particulars*. Artists and audience alike conceive of

attractive similarity between Davidson’s radical interpretation and Wollheim’s conception of criticism as retrieval of the whole creative process (and not the Gricean-style inference of the producer’s intentions).

paintings as particular individuals with a certain history (and often a pre-history too) and with a certain spatial position, due to their materiality.

Such a “superficial point” seems to rely on common sense only, with no further credentials, and this is why it has been questioned by those who, like Goodman, do not admit of objects that are independent from speech universes (this is the essence of worldmaking), but also by those who opt for a monist position on the ontology of artworks, rather than a dualist one (envisaging multiple arts on the one hand and single arts on the other). The latter may further subdivided into particularists (e.g. Croce-Collingwood) and universalists (e.g. Strawson). Once the ontological belief encapsulated in common sense gives way, it finally becomes possible (at least theoretically) to treat artworks as statements, as propositions-types, thus safeguarding the analogy between art and language and between their respective meanings. Moreover, the distinction between works of art and logos (or street signs) appears to be improper, not so much – or not only – because depiction (and the questions it raises) involves the whole set of these phenomena, but rather because contemporary art has apparently suppressed the difference between the two *in toto* – a fact that finds its best philosophical expression in Arthur Danto’s work (Danto 1981; cf. Wollheim 1998 and Velotti 2008).

It thus seems that we have reached a dead end, where common sense intuitions and their theoretical standing become once again the object of contention. The debate here essentially concerns the status itself of the philosophical enterprise, as represented in the opposition between descriptivists and revisionists (see Maistrello 2017). An aggravating factor, moreover, is that Wollheim’s position appears wholly anachronistic when compared to contemporary art.

This is not so, however: there are additional implicit reasons that lead Wollheim to radically defend common sense ontology, whose intuitions are however so severely emendated in AO that this work is mostly remembered for its demolition job carried on the “physical object hypothesis” (as in Levinson 2002). Such reasons have to do with that unity of Wollheim’s thought which ties together aesthetics and political reflection on the backdrop of a psychoanalytically bent philosophy of mind<sup>9</sup>. Let us start, then, from the exposition of the relationship between psy-

<sup>9</sup> Wollheim’s most authoritative interpreters (Budd, Gardner, Guyer, Levine, Matravers, McFee) have all noted that his philosophy of mind and his philosophy of art are mutually entailing and interdependent, as both assume “perspectives developed mostly in the other” (Davis 2010: 279).

choanalysis and art as it is articulated in *A Critic of Our Time*, Wollheim’s introduction to Adrian Stokes’ writings (Wollheim 1959). Adrian Stokes – who was an art critic, a painter, a poet, and a psychoanalyst – was also one of Wollheim’s most important reference points, so much so that *Art and Its Objects* is dedicated to him<sup>10</sup>. Wollheim’s review of Stokes is, more than anything else, an opportunity to spread, through a widely-circulated, learned journal, the theoretical proposals advanced by Melanie Klein (the founder of the British psychoanalytical school), her development of Freudian ideas and their potential for the aesthetic inquiry.

One of Klein’s main innovations of the Freudian canon (and at the centre of the long-standing debate with Anna Freud) resides in the individuation of a crucial psychological mechanism on which child development largely depends: the process of introjection and projection. Such a mechanism is active in the child psyche ever since birth, and through it, events occurring in the first few months are marked as the fundamental experiences that found all the subsequent conflicts and anxieties. The oscillation of this process of introjection and projection wholly characterizes early object relations. At an initial stage, the child is attracted to objects that excite her or annoy her, forms an attachment to them, makes them hers; “the infant [...] ‘incorporates’ them in its own ‘inner world’ of phantasy”. But once obtained them, however, the infant wants to expel them, to return them to the world: “In doing so, though, it projects not just the objects as such but also the feelings with which it has invested them, and so peoples the world with persecutors (the painful objects) or benign forces (the pleasurable objects)” (Wollheim 1959: 41-2). Such a process, which is not only analogous to, but also strongly influenced by, the processes of nutrition and excretion, is associated with two positions in child development: during the first, paranoid-schizoid stage, the infant is at the mercy of surrounding objects (above all, the mother’s breast), that at each time gratify her (feeding her) or frustrate her (being denied to her). The infant, also due to her limited cognitive abilities, assigns different feelings to different causes, forming a primitive world-view, exalted by the introjection-projection position, which is entirely fragmentary but mainly hostile, and which leads her to divide objects (and the related feelings) into “good” (i.e. satisfying) and

<sup>10</sup> This is not the only passage that Wollheim devotes to Stokes; indeed, many reprints of Stokes’ works bear a preface penned by Wollheim. See, e.g., Wollheim 1974: 315-35, according to Davis 2010: 281, “the gold standard of commentary on Stokes”.

“bad” (i.e. persecutory) objects. With the development of her faculties, the baby starts realising that the objects of her hate and love are but different aspects of the same objects (the “bad” breast that is denied to her just is the “good” breast that feeds her), and thus that her resentment for the former coincides with the destruction of the latter.

Such awareness leads to the depressive position, where the child’s persecutory anxiety for what can happen to her gives way to the anxiety for what she can do (the prototype of guilt). This leads the child to deny her aggressive impulses and to manically insist on gratification – or to regress into the earlier stage. Exiting this alternation of position requires the recognition of one’s ambivalence (“the terrible but fundamental conjunction of love and hate”); the acceptance of being the cause of the damages to the object, whether in phantasy or in reality (for example, in games, according to another crucial Kleinian clinical addition); the wish to repair it, in phantasy as in reality – or, indeed, to repair it in reality to fix it in the phantasmatic world. Doing so implies to recognize that the object is something unique and whole, independent and separated from the feelings of the ego, and constitutes the main test for the ego’s development and integration.

The ability to overcome depression, to admit of ambivalence, to repair and institute whole objects, is thus the source of altruism, morality, love and art. “Of Art – for in the creation of Form, which is one of the essential elements of Art, we have man’s most sublime effort to amend, by the construction of whole objects, for his elemental destructiveness” (Wollheim 1959: 42). Stokes’ most important legacy to Wollheim may perhaps be envisaged in precisely this aspect of “objective expressiveness”, or, in other words, in the idea of art as “a form of externalization, of making concrete the inner world” (Wollheim 1972: 11). Indeed, this is why Wollheim strenuously defends and safeguards the “physical object hypothesis”, once it is freed of misunderstandings and logical difficulties, and why, when it comes to arts that do not produce a single object, but a token of a type, he insists not only on the sharing of some (though perhaps not all) structural or historical properties, but also on the proper capacity to transfer some of these properties from token to type (for instance, nothing – besides certain matters of interpretation – prevents us from saying that Donne’s *Satires* – the *type* – are “harsh to the ear”,

which is a *physical* trait appearing in their declamation – *token* – here and now; AO, § 37)<sup>11</sup>.

This is also the deeper reason for the emphasis on the ability of human action to modify surrounding objects; to beat the medium’s recalcitrance; to realise objects that embody the artistic intention, to the extent the latter manages to assert itself in the work-object; to establish and celebrate, through reparation, those whole objects “that can then become a source of shared pleasure and consolation” (AO, § 50). “The renunciation [...] of the immediate gratification of phantasy” and the direct confrontation first with one’s medium, then with society, and their respective resistances, involves a physical and psychical labour – the artist’s work – that is the price to pay for the reparation to happen, so that the resulting object might “open to others unconscious sources of pleasure which hitherto they had been denied” (AO, § 50).

This analysis certainly has a slightly political nuance: when discussing elsewhere the contemporary social condition and referring to the Marxian concept of “alienation”, Wollheim writes that “it is because the worker cannot identify any single artifact as the product of his own labour that he is denied any sense of creativity or self-fulfillment in the process” (Wollheim 1961: 26). It is the lack of such work, and of the will to highly refine one’s products to make them unique through their physical identity (which is typical of art practice), that leads Wollheim to

<sup>11</sup> One might ask how, *vis à vis* Goodman’s distinction between autographic and allographic arts, Wollheim can maintain a particularist position preserving his use of the type/token disjunction. Wollheim (*contra* Goodman) tends not to consider types as universals *strictu sensu* pointing out that the relationship between type and its tokens is more “intimate” than that between, say, a property and its instances: the type is “present in all its tokens like the universal in all its instances, but for much of the time we think and talk of the type as though it were itself a kind of token, though a peculiarly important or pre-eminent one” (AO, § 35). The property of “being rectangular” has rectangular instances but is not itself rectangular; no red flag, on the other hand, can be correctly shaped if not rectangular itself and that, according to Wollheim, means that the property of being rectangular which belongs to token of *this* red flag also belongs to the type *The red flag*. Such “transmission”, as he calls it, of qualities from token to type allows Wollheim to keep faith to his particularist creed in spite of Goodman’s allographic claims or, by the way, his insistence on notation: for Wollheim two orthographically identical poems *might* give rise to difference in experience caused by different historical properties, as in the hyperbolic case presented in the celebrated *Pierre Menard* story by J.L. Borges (see Savile 1971; AO, Essay II). This case would suggest that the correct principle of individuation for works of multiple art does not depend on the notation employed. In ontology the idea that a type is a kind of abstract object has been developed by Wetzel (e.g. 2009).

speak of “minimal art”, with reference to all those objects that are “undifferentiated in themselves”, or whose “differentiation [...] comes not from the artist but from a nonartistic source, like nature or the factory” (Wollheim 1974: 101). The point that generates anxieties and perplexities is not whether to accept or not such products as works of art; nor is it to defer the question to a distinction between a descriptive and an evaluative sense of the term “artistic”, *à la* Dickie. Indeed, Wollheim stresses that artists like Duchamp *minimise* the traditional work stage, and thus the artistic content, but they do *maximise*, so to speak, the decision that the work has come to an end, which is what usually ascertains the achievement of a highly individualised and elaborated product. In a slogan, “Duchamp makes a decision like an artist, but the decision that he makes is not like the artist’s” (Wollheim 1974: 108). In delivering objects that are entirely similar to those that inhabit our daily world, Duchamp and others like him are producing works that “belong to art, and not to art-history” (Wollheim 1974: 124). Wollheim, however, does not dramatize the current artistic scene as some of his contemporaries, for instance Stanley Cavell (1969), do: art history has been punctuated by moments of dismantling of traditional states of affairs, which artists have come to perceive as excessively differentiated and in need of simplification. Following Stokes, Wollheim indeed states that “it would be difficult to appreciate what Duchamp was trying to do without an overall knowledge of the history of art’s metamorphoses” (AO, § 61).

#### 4. *Art and communication?*

The danger implied by the systematic and complete “disintegration of our concept of ‘art’ as we have it” (Wollheim 1974: 104) should rather be assessed in terms of (the loss of) whole objects’ reparation and institution. Such processes thus undergo a drastic downscaling. This downscaling would be without appeal if, to the tendencies of contemporary art, one were to add a reframing of aesthetics in terms that entirely rule out the experiential aspect of the encounter with the work of art in its individuality. This is an aesthetics, in other words, that definitively accepts that works of art function (have always functioned) as logos or street signs, instead of embodying, in its mainstreams, a single moment of their history (namely, the current one).

In a telling passage of *The thread of life*, his philosophy of mind masterpiece, Wollheim attempts to illuminate a crucial aspect of the process



of working through a phantasy by means of an analogy with the understanding of the artwork. There certainly are important differences: the critic, indeed, tries to understand a work of art of which, unlike the patient, he is not the maker; unlike a phantasy, a work of art is, in a sense, made precisely to be interpreted. However, Wollheim claims that “understanding the work is a matter of perceiving it in the light of everything that we have come to believe about it”, and thus this is “experiential or by acquaintance, not inferential or by description” (Wollheim 1984: 233). The crucial similarity, he maintains, lies in the fundamental distinction between, “on the one hand, the accumulation of information, which is preparatory to the act of understanding, and, on the other hand, the act of understanding itself. The act of understanding is not the result of an inferential leap to a further or synoptic piece of information. The act of understanding is not propositional at all, and therefore we neither need to have, nor are we debarred by lacking, means at our disposal with which to record the meaning either of the work or of the phantasy” (Wollheim 1984: 234).

This is also why Wollheim refuses to reduce the whole set of these phenomena to the sphere of communication (and similarly, of language). Following Grice and Davidson, Wollheim defines communication as “the attempt, or, more narrowly perhaps, the successful attempt, on the part of an agent to instil certain beliefs, or – a weaker version of the same idea – certain speculations, or suggestions, or hopes, or suspicions, into the mind or minds of an audience” (Wollheim 2001c: 241). Such an account presupposes a specific audience, which is unusual when it comes to art, instead of a simply hypothetical audience (see Wollheim 1987: 96); this approach thus gives the artist “the burden of so expressing himself as to take account of the audience’s cognitive stock” (Wollheim 2001c: 242), where “cognitive stock” refers to “the knowledge, belief, and conceptual holding” (Wollheim 1993: 134) the audience needs for a correct grasp of the artwork, just as a speaker modifies her lexical choices according to her audience. Such an idea of communication should suffice to get rid of the misleading idea that Wollheim defends an entirely combinatory and regulative idea of language, where intentions play no role when it comes to linguistic meaning, but exclusively when it comes to artistic meaning (hence, discrediting the underserved label of non-canonical intentionalist (Bermejo Salar: 102; 106, n. 20).

Unlike Davidson, Wollheim certainly conceives of language as including a conventional element that plays a crucial role in communication (Wollheim 1987: 22) but, when applied to aesthetics, this communica-

tion model (even if speaker’s intentions and their explicit recognition are admitted) does not leave any room for the spectator’s experience of the artwork (making more explicit Wollheim’s refusal of any Gricean inspired model of explanation of depiction and, more generally, of art). In short, it does not matter how much past or present art might be communication; “nothing is art in virtue of satisfying the communicative pattern” (Wollheim 2001c: 243).

APAL frames communication as a transmission of a belief in which it is possible to (i) identify the transmitted belief, (ii) what the latter assumes, and (iii) what is irrelevant (APAL: 25). We might be justified in taking also this account as referring to the Shannon and Weaver model (Shannon 1948; See AO, § 56, where Wollheim discusses the application of information theory to aesthetics), which was crucial for theorists of communication and semioticians in general – that is, precisely the audience *Pictures and language*, FPO and APAL mean to address. Here Wollheim insists that such a model has nothing to do with the understanding of paintings (though the remark might be extended to any work of art): “Pictorial works of art are, by and large, not designed for specific audiences, and they seldom have a narrow, cognitive content” (APAL: 25). Again, the point seems to lie in the discrepancy between what is mobilized by critics and experts – the *theory* – and what Wollheim conceives of as the effective ground of the actual encounter with the work of art – *aesthetic experience* mediated by common sense and intuition as we find them *after (his) philosophical analysis*. This last corollary is especially significant, if we consider that such factors are precisely those that distance Wollheim from Goodman, in whose view being “communication [...] the purpose of symbolizing [...], works of art are messages conveying facts, thoughts and feelings; and their study belongs to omnivorous new growth called ‘communication theory’” (Goodman 1968: 257).

One may perhaps consider this group of articles as an exercise in misunderstanding, insofar as their polemical targets are theories that are out-of-date (Shannon and Weaver) or not entirely relevant (like Bois’ analysis of some Picasso’s painting, which is treated as a universally accepted theory on the nature of painting); or just that this is but yet another instance of the long-standing issue between analytical and continental philosophers, the latter being here embodied by the French structuralist and post-structuralist tradition. Such a charge however seems ultimately unwarranted, if one looks at the benevolence and interest with which Wollheim approaches his case studies. On the contrary, the focus has always been the art-language analogy, and as a proof of

this, we may recall how Wollheim (1991a: 441) applauded, in his review of Walton’s important work *Mimesis and make believe*, “a powerful, timely critique of the various linguistic, semi-linguistic, quasi-linguistic models of artistic content or meaning that are so much in favour today, all across the spectrum from Nelson Goodman to Jacques Derrida” – his great disagreement with Walton notwithstanding.

This confirms once again Wollheim’s main worry, namely the assumption of aesthetics under a semiotic-symbolic paradigm, which is incorrect not so much (or not only) because art does not depend on rules (cf. AO, § 58), as much as because such an approach dissolves the work of art *qua* object, just as FPO does, thus jeopardising all that is related to it. In other words, this semiotic-symbolic approach undermines the work of art as the result of an actual, historicized creative work, distinctive of what is most proper to men in overcoming those aggressive impulses that are intrinsic to human nature. More than that: for transcending the depressive position through the institution of whole objects, through reparation, is inextricably connected to the direct experience of the work-object, to its physical identity and unity, and since such an experience does not derive from an inferential act, it cannot be conveyed through symbolic means only. In this sense, it comes as no surprise Wollheim’s rejection of a thesis “dominant over much contemporary philosophy of mind” according to which “there is a one-one correspondence between the linguistic forms that we use to ascribe mental phenomena and the ways in which such phenomena ought to be classified”, like a correspondence between forms of ascription of desire and kinds of desire (Wollheim 1999: 20). Since emotions, in Wollheim’s psychoanalytically oriented framework, cannot be “isomorphically mapped [...] to the emotion terms as actually used” (Levine 2016: 257)<sup>12</sup>, it is just the direct and actual encounter with the work of art that could “trigger” the proper aesthetic experience, something that no vicarious familiarity could do<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Strictly related to this point, I agree with Levine 2016: 258 that this “is also suggestive of a reason why we should hold aesthetics to be such a valuable and central part of our lives. It is a reflection, a true reflection, of experience that even language and conceptualisation may or even must miss. Aesthetic experience is a unique way of experiencing and interacting with the world, and intimate aspects of ourselves beyond the reach of cognition”.

<sup>13</sup> The importance this aspect has for the contemporary debate on the Acquaintance Principle and the aesthetic testimony cannot further be developed here (for a survey see Robson 2012).

This particular point could help to appreciate the difference between the psychoanalytic approach of Klein-Wollheim and that of Lacan (the most influential among art critics). In his preface to the second edition of Sigmund Freud, Wollheim highlights, among other things, Lacan’s radical disregard of the body and the conditions and psychological effects linked to its maturation, concentrating almost exclusively on “symbol acquisition, its successes and its failures” as “virtually the whole of what the mind is required to negotiate”. According to Wollheim 1991b: xl, such an approach not only subtracts psychoanalysis from the domain of science (what Freud fought for all his life), placing it within “the realm of hubristic metaphysics”; it also drastically reduces the role of experience: “In attenuating the role of experience, Lacan obliterates the more recognizable features of the psyche as Freud saw it: the urgency of desire, the pain of conflict, the looming presence of heavenly corporeal figures, and the enduring power of sensuous preverbal sensation”<sup>14</sup>.

Wollheim’s philosophy of art is entirely devoted to re-establishing the centrality of the aesthetic experience, and presenting it as firmly rooted in human nature and its psychology; this, however, is realised not through its hypostatisation, or through the research of its essential traits, but through its objects. Losing the object, or impoverishing it, or making it replaceable, means to deny “certain natural tendencies, i.e. that of producing objects to alleviate, and that of finding objects to match, our inner states” (AO, § 29: 39-40); it means, that is, to lose or impoverish or make replaceable also the aesthetic experience and its reparation drive. To minimise, neglect, or defer experience means to minimise, neglect or make uncertain the cognitive and emotional faculties such experience depends on; it ultimately means to abdicate to a substantial and essential part of human nature.

This reparation urge constitutes the motive of Wollheim’s whole philosophical enterprise, in aesthetics as much as in moral and political philosophy; even its artistic ontology (i.e. the physical object hypothesis) is meant to defend that. This is why, quite apart from their different conceptions of the mental, Goodman’s ontology of extensionally treated referents (whether artefacts or natural objects) to which aesthetic func-

<sup>14</sup> It is not surprising therefore, that such a neglect of experience derives from the Lacanian hypothesis of the linguistic structure of the primary unconscious process. However, as Davis 2010: 283, quoting the same passage, acutely notes, “what Wollheim really disliked [...] was Lacan’s – or the inevitable Lacanian – non- or antiaestheticist conclusion that art can offer us no imaginative reparations, no possibility of ‘transcendence of depressive position’”.

tions are assigned (functions that can be intermittent, ignored or withdrawn at different times or in different places), does not do for Wollheim. On the other hand, Danto's idea of transfiguration of different objects to which the status of artwork is ascribed is also inadequate, for it is too weak and mobile, too dependent on interpretations, not sufficiently tied to artistic intention and thereby not sufficiently experiential. Finally, also Walton's fictionalism is faulty in Wollheim's view, for, although related to material objects and the experiential dimension, it still draws from a misleading experience, the imaginary one, which ultimately takes the distance from the object and the maker's intention.

Wollheim criticises all of these views on a purely philosophical basis, it is true; yet the point seems to be that none of them manages to account "for the pathos of art, certainly of all great art, for the sense of loss so precariously balanced against the riches and grandeur of achievement" (AO, § 50: 78) nor for the redemption and reparation element that the creation of a whole object brings about, both to its maker and its observer. By referring to psychoanalytical concepts such as introjection, projection, whole object, externalisation, Wollheim manages instead to participate in, update, and corroborate, the traditional theory of art as expression, while safeguarding its aspect of uniqueness and exemplarity. This demand is entirely in line with the preceding and competing aesthetics, like the Croce-Collingwood line that was the polemical target of AO. At the same time, through its reference to Wittgenstein's idea of intransitivity, Wollheim's approach manages to avoid the hypostatisation of a private mental object (the artwork-idea, so to speak), as well as a physical or physiological reductionism (the artwork-sensation), and the resulting obliteration of the artwork-object, the one proper artwork<sup>15</sup>.

Although Wollheim is considered a true pioneer of the enterprise that sees psychoanalytic theory as "an extension of commonsense psychology" (Wollheim 1993: 101; Gardner 1993, 1995; Snelling 2001) and this proves once again the intrinsic unity of his thought under the aegis of common sense, the introduction of a psychoanalytic framework brings along both a genuinely speculative element and a quasi-revisionistic trait to aesthetics. By virtue of the former, his approach is not only a matter of words, nor a metaphysically dogmatic exercise; by virtue of the latter, it

<sup>15</sup> Guyer 2014: 513 too sees Wollheim above all as an heir and a continuator of the main themes of modern aesthetics "the cognitivist approach to art, the recognition of the emotional impact of art, and the pleasure in aesthetic experience captured in the notion of free play".

is open to empirical confirmations – a theoretical attitude that becomes evident in the notion of “seeing-in”. This psychological illustration of the pictorial meaning, indeed “the kind of account that Wittgenstein, quite rightly, deposed as an account of linguistic meaning” (*Pictures and language*: 185) does not apply to representational content only, but deploys further layers concerning the expressive, textual, historical and metaphorical meaning (as it is well explored in *Painting as an art*). Finally, this is the path Wollheim chose and developed in view of a more general aim: to both “redeem us from misunderstandings and metaphysical cramps” and to “restore a genuinely human and not naturalistically mortified image of experience” (Picardi 2001: 21)<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> I am extremely grateful to Stefano Marino, Giovanni Matteucci, Stefano Velotti and Alberto Voltolini for having read the whole paper and for their comments. An anonymous referee cleverly stimulated the final result. Monica Spocchia made the impossible possible. Special thanks to Laura Schulderer for her help. Giovanni Matteucci prompted me long ago to write a thesis on Richard Wollheim, something that changed my whole perspective on the subjects Giovanni teaches so well, and on all the rest. My greatest debt is to Eva Picardi: she bravely bore with endless hours of rambling discussions and never tired of pointing out obscurities and suggesting corrections of my PhD thesis during the most difficult period of her life. Without her help, encouragement and example that thesis and this paper would have been inconceivable.

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