

Figures Cut into the Air

The Ballet of Mathematical Elegance

by Mark Daniel Cohen

David Smith: A Centennial

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**HYPERION:  
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS**



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Mathematical Elegance

**David Smith: A Centennial**

**Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, February 3 – May 14, 2006**

**Centre Pompidou, Paris, June 14 – August 21, 2006**

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*Omne ignotum pro magnifico*  
 (Everything unknown is taken for magnificent)  
 —Tacitus, *Agricola*, section 30

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“I begin to think, Watson,” said Holmes, “that I make a mistake in explaining. ‘*Omne ignotum pro magnifico*,’ you know, and my poor little reputation, such as it is, will suffer shipwreck if I am so candid. Can you not find the advertisement, Mr. Wilson?”  
 —Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Red-Headed League”

## 1

Every attempt to write of art serves to damp the heat to the crucible. Every effort to make plain what can be perceived at the heart of the aesthetic conundrum manages to make the mystery of it appear plain. If art is anything—and we hold in our hands perpetually the possibility of standing at the precipice, the doll of the thing teetering before the mind’s eye, precarious at the brink, we toy permanently with the chance that art may be nothing whatever—then it is surely a portion of the life of the mind, an aspect of the intellectual enterprise: a form of knowing, a formulation to reveal. If art is, then it is an imagining by which we become aware, and what we become aware of is some aspect of some truth, some accuracy that is unknowable, or not so well known, in any other manner. By long-standing acknowledgement, by common sense and the self-evidence evident to our inner eyes, the awareness brought by art is something other than the quotidian, a knowledge less ordinary than the one in which we trade by daylight, than the intellectual cash we pass among each other in the glaring light of noon. It is a luminescent night of the illuminating mind, a dim and shimmering scenario that pulses and shifts invisibly behind the dramas portrayed on the spotlight and fictional stage. But to become aware of such awareness, to tell ourselves what art has brought us to know, to be conscious of it fully, to know it brightly, tears out the heart of the very knowledge we presumably have achieved. It tinkers apart the conjuring gestures as if ripping out the gears and springs of a clock taken down from the mantel. To say to ourselves what we have aesthetically said brings our saying to nothing. It evaporates under the gentle pressure of the palest of breaths. It melts under the delicate friction of the dawning whisper of consciousness.

It is the peril of aesthetics to lie of what it embraces, to enfold what it tries to disclose. To speak openly and precisely of the nature of art is to misrepresent

by its nature the nature of what is spoken. It is not a risk of aesthetics alone. The perhaps more normative manner of approach, the track of the art historical—the determining of the pedigree of the artistic gesture, the placing of the object or event in the necessarily theoretical flow of artistic development and the accounting of its anteriority and implications for the future, the determining of whence it comes and where it leads—does nothing more to reveal the intrinsic, or even conditional, nature of the thing itself, for it displaces the initial object of concern with a story of its background. We are left with a knowledge of actual and proposed (future) history but with no understanding of the pawns that are maneuvered in the game. The work of art has been deposed for the tale of its eventuality. In short, the subject has been changed—the meaning of the art has been substituted by the meaning of the history it plays, like an actor in a theater who knows and delivers his lines but whose mind cavorts in his moments of silence according to secret impulses all his own.

For they are not the same thing. What art conveys and what art history entails are as different as mystery and mundanity, as foreign as a speech sung by Aeschylus and a plot schemed by Euripides. Art history is the explanation of the development of a means to an end. Aesthetics deals in the ends only: the purposes to which the historical process is deployed—not a teleological orientation, for that is mere sleight of hand to return us to the historical, but the motivations, efficient rather than final causations coupled with the interim accomplishments that bubble up along the way, like the ruminations in the cauldron. Aesthetics seeks the reasons that anyone would bother with art at all. For history takes for granted that everything that happens would happen, that given the pertinent factors of influence everything that should happen will happen, and the pawns, simply, are us. The ambition of history is to account for everything that contributes to eventuality, to take into account everything except freedom, and if art is anything, and particularly if it is a precinct in the district of knowing, a pasture in the geography of authentic awareness, it is *freedom*.

And so the considerations that confront art with art history position us in the situation of Macbeth—when we are observing history we are with the witches, watching what we do as if it were done by others, others whose reasons compel them before our eyes, and when we are in history we act with full discretion, or so it seems to us, but the witches are observing. We cannot be in both places at once, and yet we are in both places at once, and so our situation is absurd, for two boxes cannot contain each other, one cannot stand at both ends of the microscope at the same time. But the truth of the matter is—we are the microscopes. Susan Sontag once warned us that the “historicizing perspective” is the “gesture whereby man indefatigably patronizes himself,” but that assumes we have a choice about our patronizing, and as Nietzsche instructed us at the beginning of “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life,” the expense of the freedom to act is the periodic demolition of awareness, the strategic move of forgetting, the ability to choose to live *unhistorically*. To act is to live by the knowledge we cannot say to ourselves

without falling into history, and so the question remains whether the will to act permits us to be conscious at all and whether the knowledge that matters can matter if we know it.

And we confront a similar disability from the other side. The failure to contemplate the implications of art—the reluctance to elucidate the meaning of the work in order to avoid adulterating the aesthetic aspect of the art, to tell ourselves with clarity what we have learned, to phrase it in terms that are self-evident in their significance—deposits us in the deliberate position of knowing nothing of what has been achieved. We become, at our own hands, incapable of saying anything to ourselves regarding what we, we claim, have learned—we know nothing of what we know. We then are left with the single alternative of an uncritical respect—an enthusiasm for what we do not understand. For us to grant our approval of what we do not bother even to evaluate puts us in the position of practicing a superstition. The love of art transforms into a mindless adulation, for there is no form of intelligence that resembles stupidity—the two never look anything alike. And we descend into “art superstition,” which has taken on its various forms in our time, although one cannot help but feel that there is nothing new in this: we talk of the “artist’s intention,” although no one seems able to say much of what it is in any instance; we speak of everyone finding his own meaning in the work, although no one seems to finish the thought or so much as engage the question of whose work the work of art thereby becomes; we consider the contextuality of meaning and so proliferate the possibilities of implication that we mist over and obscure the fact that no one finalizes the approach with the positing of a potential coherent meaning resultant of some context some place; or we stand before the art and nod knowingly. And one would have thought the principal purpose of the intellectual practice, wherever it is undertaken, is to dispel all superstitious impulses.

So it appears that the circle closes around the back. The attempt to phrase artistic meaning in terms that can be clearly comprehended and communicated betrays the work of art by dispelling the aura of depth perception and depth of thought, by installing an ordinariness that is inimical to art’s core purpose. It is, in short, to interpret, and Sontag long ago counseled us that to interpret is to remove the art for the sake of hearing ourselves think. On the other hand, to refrain from thinking about art is nothing more than to refrain from thinking—it deserves no better classification—and the art superstition, the sheer avidity for the thing, takes the place of all knowledge, arises as satisfied ignorance, and as is ever the case with the superstitious grip, we move then like a herd. We lose our souls. Both the interpretation to make sense and the complacency that requires no sense be made serve to displace the art; they substitute themselves for what it was we thought we were seeking and for what it was we expected we would obtain. In both cases, the art, for the viewers, for those for whom it was intended, comes to nothing.

The difficulty in knowing with precision what is known through art describes a core epistemological problem: given the implicit and ineluctable self-reflexive nature of awareness, is it possible, fully and properly, to know what we know,

or, more simply, is it possible to know? For, clearly, intrinsic to knowledge is the awareness of possessing the knowledge, the self-awareness of the knower, knowledgeable of oneself as knowing in the moment that one knows. More simply still: all awareness is a species of self-awareness—to know something in the sense of responding to it without concretely being aware of it, or oneself, or of oneself responding, does not seem to qualify as consciousness. It is a contradiction in terms. We must know that we know, else we are unconscious. It is presence of mind that marks the conscious moment, and so the displacement of the object of knowledge occurs of necessity, and the presence of mind disturbs the presence of anything else—the primary subject of mental focus becomes the exercise of mental focus. For to reflect on anything is to place one's own face in the mirror of awareness—one's sense of oneself in the very moment of reflection occludes that which we attempt to reflect upon. Whatever we attempt to know, it is always we who are in the way of the knowledge. The object of thought is ever behind our images, our own protocols of self-aware meditation, the thing we think about is bound within the circuit of the airless bell jar of contemplation, and we see nothing so well as our own smudged fingerprints coating the glass.

The difficulty is not that of the relation of thought to the world. It is the difficulty of knowing anything, of knowing per se, for whatever we attempt to make the center of our focus slips out from under the mental gaze, lost somewhere behind the tunneling awareness of us watching us watching us. The situation is comparable to the problem of contemplating the now moment: any moment we attempt to gaze into becomes evidently a moment remembered, as we discover inevitably that the now moment is the one in which we are making the try at awareness, not that in which we were what we now are trying to be aware of ourselves as. The now is always behind our backs, serving as the backdrop of thinking, as its medium, and not as our center of attention. Nor is it a matter of time, and we may think about this more appropriately as the problem of the "here moment," for the chronology is not what is at issue. Whenever we attempt to focus upon ourselves as acting in the world, we who are focusing are somewhere else in mental space, *not in the world*, observing ourselves in action—standing at the eyepiece of the microscope. However one casts the matter, Macbeth is always with the witches, looking at and thinking about himself as an actor in some other world, in some other place—when he chooses to think.

The problem arguably is the central engagement of philosophy. If philosophy is the field of inquiry into the nature of knowledge, if it is the exploration of the ways in which we know and what is necessarily known prior to the embarkation into the empirical, which lies within the purview of the sciences, then the issue of knowledge that is unknown and threatens to be unknowable looms at the heart of the concern. In short, since philosophy is itself an exercise in thought, a strike at knowledge, is philosophy possible at all? For lying at the heart of this problem is the question: is there a lingua franca that takes us from thought to object? Can the thought of the thing and the thing ever coincide? In principle, there shouldn't be, for the system of thought and

the system of the world are structurally unlike—in principle, there should be no system that could stretch across and integrate evenly with both, there should be no systematic relation possible between them; since they are not alike, it should not be possible for a third system to be like them both—and so inference and physical causation should not agree. Inferences out of rational inevitability should not be able to follow events, to flow at their side. And yet, rational inferences do. Something is off.

Even so, the necessary focus of thought on the thinker, the imposition in every instance of our faces on the mirror and our fingerprints on its glass, forces a question: Are we standing at the wrong end of the echo chamber of our own thoughts? Are we always one moment, or one mental inch, displaced from the validity of our own thinking? Given that thinking places us out of the world, that we as actors in the world, as ever the primary focus of our thinking, are always not the ones who are doing the thinking, is thinking an action it is possible for us to take? Or, when we attempt to think, is it the witches we are hearing? Is it some other voice coming to us? And if so, then when we attempt to think deliberately on some particular matter, how can we trust what we receive, given that we know nothing of its provenance? And whose image is it reflected in the mirror?

Yet, inferences do follow the progress of the world, and we do know something accurately. The evidence of all the testing is that we know much. So there is something more to the process than this system of considerations. Something has been omitted from the equation. We must learn something more about the matter of how we learn, the matter of how and what we come to know. To do that, we require more data, data that stands outside of the range of these contemplations, which render themselves so sedately and obligingly into the internal contradictions minced by this neat logic. And to gather such data, we must resort to one of the precincts in which new knowledge is forged, in which new protocols of knowing are made possible; we must examine what is occurring there. The most controlled and deliberate practice of the recasting of the methods of knowing, of the formulation of knowledge that lies outside the internal frustrations of our knowing, is art. For it is evident that, despite our inability to make clear to ourselves what art means, some of us possess an understanding of art sufficient to create it and some of us possess an understanding sufficient to have a feeling comprehension of it. The mere fact that art exists, unless it proves to be utterly meaningless, constitutes in itself a compelling body of data. Which is to say that art is the laboratory for philosophy, that art is the experimental situation in which philosophy obtains what evidence and proof it may.

## 2

David Smith has been known, decreasingly over time and for reasons that probably made more sense at the time, as the one sculptor of the Abstract Expressionist movement. However, one can observe some sense to the