

# Breaking Paradigms: Abrams' Paradigm and Contemporary Art Anomalies. Proposals for a New Approach

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## Abstract

Meyer Howard Abrams described a paradigm which implicitly underlies most of the Anglo-Saxon philosophy of art; the artwork is the core of the scheme: an artwork-centered structure, in which any other element (artist, audience, universe) is analysed as an exclusive connection to it. This way, the paradigm can undergo modification without defacing the structure. The '60s were the stage of a gentle revolution in art-practice and Mandelbaum's, Danto's and Dickie's suggestions add a further tag in the scheme: the context. This paradigm works accordingly within a compartmentalisation that does not take into account the evolution of contemporary art. Working from a bottom-up perspective, some anomalies are highlighted, requiring a new lens (or paradigm) to develop proper theoretical tools in philosophy of art.

**Keywords:** Meyer Howard Abrams, Paradigm, Philosophy of Art, Ontology of Art, Contemporary Art, Decentralisation, Art Market

## Abrams' paradigm

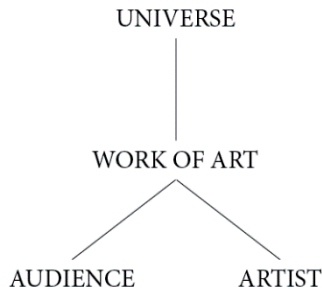
Meyer Howard Abrams was a lean and elegant man. He used to smoke a tobacco pipe, hung sideways from his lips. As a man of another age, he gave us a practical conceptual scheme – a kind of orientation among critical theories and statements on philosophy of art. While Ivor Armstrong Richard (1924) was drowning in contradictory and conflicting philosophies of art - since he couldn't establish any guidelines - Abrams developed a useful compass to find orientation in an area where others got lost.

According to Thomas Kuhn, scientific research has a cyclical pattern: scientists write down a paradigm (a conceptual scheme) around which further researches clot. A paradigm directs explorations, it is logically economical – summing up scientific observations in a comprehensive grid – and psychologically familiar since it draws borders thereby building a close and easily investigable world. Moreover, as a lighthouse, it fosters analysis: no studies exist outside the paradigm itself. In other

words, paradigms “provide models from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research” (Kuhn, 1962, p.10) – in other words, “normal science”.

Nevertheless, puzzling problems can arise; sometimes they are solved with minor adjustments to the paradigm-nature and in other cases, they could be delayed. Yet, there are cases where anomalies turn into sources of crisis which become widely recognised by some of the field-professionals. The paradigm loses its power, it gets weaker and scientists start developing new examples of actual scientific practice thereby developing a new paradigm.

As a field of scientific research, philosophy of art is somewhat different. Abrams outlines an actual paradigm – “a frame of reference simple enough to be readily manageable, yet flexible enough” (Abrams, 1953, .5). Four elements emerge in all theories: the work of art, the artist, the audience and the universe; and, as props, these coordinates define the conceptual scheme. Each theory is concerned with outlining a precise theoretical proposal by highlighting two overriding elements – one of which is always the artwork. Four main directions emerge as a result: mimetic theories, expressive theories, pragmatic theories and objective theories. Each resultant theory is concerned with defining particular borders for each prop, since each element has pliable semantic boundaries.



“X is an artwork only if it is an imitation” (Carroll, 1999, p.21). The *motto* of mimetic theorists holds that artworks are nothing but imitations, emphasising the relation between artwork and universe. It is the most enduring approach, becoming a sort of theoretical myth – endorsed by several authors, Batteaux (1746) and Lessing (1836) among others. Goodman’s account (1969) – on the difference between representation and imitation – allows for an extension: “x is an artwork only if x has a subject about which it makes some comment” (Carroll, 1999, p.26). It is reminiscent of Danto’s *aboutness* (Danto, 1981) and allows the addressing of neo-representationalists from the same perspective.

Expressive theories (artwork-artist) focus on the internal and emotive life of the artist as a starting point for speculation. Artworks are soliloquies and artists

are scientists since, “engaged in expressing emotions” (Hospers, 1956, p.293), they select highly individualised states of feeling and clarify them by means of lines, shapes and colors. According to Langer (1957), an artwork expresses “its creator’s idea of immediate, felt, emotive life” (p.8). Croce-Collingwood’s theory fits into this set as Kemp (2013) states that “art is expression that we engage with via the intuitive capacity”.

Pragmatic theories insist on artworks-audience biunivocal relations: the former’s purpose is “to achieve certain effects in an audience” (Abrams, 1953, p.14). They recall Horace’s *delectare et movere*, expand in rhetoric *compendia* and spread through Hurd’s and Johnson’s pages – “the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing” (Raleigh, 1908, p.16). On the other hand, artworks might also possess “the capacity of affording aesthetic experience” (Carroll, 1999, p.162). As an example, Jerome Stolnitz (1960) and Edward Bullough (1973), regardless of how divergent their arguments may be<sup>1</sup>, unveil a common ground: the ontological attribution relies on audience reactions while looking at discreet objects.

Finally, objective theories identify artworks as self-sufficient entities, characterised by internal relations that establish their own criteria. Art is neither a mirror nor a reflection: art for art’s sake declares its autonomy. As Carroll (1999, p.115) concludes, “X is a work of art if and only if x is designed primarily in order to possess and to exhibit significant form”.

We are reassured of the implicit presence of the paradigm that covers a quite broad timeframe and is utterly evident in the analytical tradition. Abrams’ outspoken admission is comparable to Carroll’s overview (1999): their historical surveys are placed at the limits of a straddle between essentialist and non-essentialist traditions. Abrams sums up the long pathway that leads to this divergence, while Carroll’s summary is a working-tool for the understanding of the last forty years of the previous century. Ultimately, Carroll supports Abrams’ paradigm’s implicit presence, despite the aforementioned straddle.

A contemporary Aristotelian could advance a counter-argument since the Aristotelean aesthetic is not just an example of a mimetic approach. Even if Aristotle’s account is usually mentioned under the heading of mimetic theories, his aesthetic shows pragmatic and objective approaches as catharsis is an emotional education. In other words, it seems as though the idea of a hierarchical preponderance of a couple of elements is reductive. I am not suggesting that centuries of reflections on art have fought the complexity of art phenomena with unequal weapons and neither is Abrams doing so. However, each theory has a starting point. Take the case

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1 Stolnitz and Bullough propose affected-oriented accounts – insisting on peculiar kinds of actions or attitudes. The former proposes a common action (contemplation) realised with specific skills – “disinterested and sympathetic attention to and contemplation of any object of awareness whatever, for its own sake” (Stolnitz, 1960, p. 34-35), while the latter defines a *sui generis* action, since the artwork has to be “distanced” from our “practical needs and ends” (Saxena, 1978, p.81).

of Aristotle: the tragic work is “analysed formally as a self-determining whole made up of parts, all organised around the controlling part: the tragic plot” (Abrams, 1953, p.27). Tragedy is therefore recognised in its autonomy. Nevertheless, such a result is made possible by a mimetic approach: verisimilitude permits further pragmatic or objective considerations.

To sum up, Abrams’ paradigm follows two dogmas – with few exceptions. On the one hand, a biunivocal relation grounds any possible philosophical reflection on art: a couple of elements sets its theoretical and explanatory power among the others, while the remaining elements are understood as ancillaries – understood following the aforementioned couple. On the other hand, the artwork is placed at the center. It is the starting and ending point of a circularly built analytical structure which creates a pyramidal picture: the artwork, as a mysterious chamber of secrets, becomes the theoretical target which is the only concern the philosopher keeps in mind in approaching art phenomena. The *explanandum* and the *explanans* collapse, the pathway itself becomes the destination.

### **A gentle revolution: the artworld**

Carl Andre’s humble tiles, Dan Flavin’s fluorescent neon lights, Lawrence Weiner’s Xerox copies and all the things that Robert Barry knows: a revolutionary tide sweeping away previous preconceptions. During the ‘60s, artworks transformed their very ontological *status*. Artists claimed an expanded field, as if the work of art itself would not stand alone, requiring the presence of some sort of context as a source of validity.

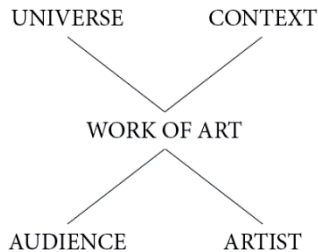
During the ‘60s, the *limen* that separated life from art got thinner, resulting in a final overlapping of the two thereby collapsing any *differentia* (Danto, 1986, 1996). Yvonne Rainer’s *Room Service* is an example in which dancers carry a mattress around the ballroom and move from the stage to the emergency exits and back again. It is indiscernible to professional movers’ actions and only the context – as a fictional marker – can help us. It sounds Wittgensteinian: the meaning is nothing but the use (Wittgenstein, 1953). Minimalism offers two interpretations. Firstly, meaning undergoes continuous modifications – the context determines the explanation of the artwork itself. Secondly, meanings arise in spaces of mutual exchange<sup>2</sup>; hence, the autonomy of authors’ intention is rejected. *Untitled (L-beams)* (1965) by Robert Morris supports this point. Three indistinguishable modules are installed with different orientations, so that the visitor cannot perceive them as identical, proving that space modifies shapes. Visitors’ moving eyes and bodies construe and reorient spaces – these are the early signs of Rosalind Krauss’ “expanded field” (1981).

2 *The Death of the Author* (1967) by Roland Barthes – corroborates such interpretations. The intention of the author cannot guarantee meanings and purposes of artworks. Meanings emerge from a mutual interchange between audience’s members.

Moreover, Duchamp's 'ready-mades' are understood in their performative and linguistic power. If selection is creation (Groys, 2005), an artwork requires nothing but a declaration – a linguistic act composed against a background that validates it. As Hal Foster (2004) highlights, artists undertake common strategies to eliminate any ontological or intrinsic definition of their artworks.

To sum up, meaning as use suggests the presence of a framework that warrants art's vocabulary. George Dickie (1962), Arthur Danto (1964) and Maurice Mandelbaum (1965) develop similar instances in philosophy creating a gentle revolution. Dickie (1962) argues, against pragmatic theories, that psychic distance or aesthetic attitude cannot help in perceiving artworks. Instead, picture frames, raised devices and the like serve "merely as a signal (if any is needed) that certain rules are to be obeyed" (p.299). If there are rules, there is an institution that handles them – or at least a context that handed them down. Danto's (1964) renowned article – *The Artworld* – talks about artistic theories and knowledge of the history of art as keys (or paradigms, see Jones, 2000) for the understanding of specific activities. Therefore, without any theories, one will never get the chance to see art – ironically, just a few years later, Tom Wolfe (1975) wrote that "believing is seeing" (p.4). Danto (1964) recalls "something the eye cannot decri" (p.580) as a necessary condition for the existence of art phenomena. Finally, Mandelbaum (1965) criticises Wittgensteinian's anti-essentialist approach on art, invalidating family resemblance accounts which rest on genetic properties, meaning that they are just generic resemblances. Thereby, Mandelbaum suggests that a common ancestor is required – to be found in the right place, "without assuming that any [common] feature [...] must be some manifest characteristic" (p.222). Such a feature could insist on relational properties – again, a reference to a validating framework.

Abrams' paradigm (1953) does not accommodate such instances and it seems that something is missing. Such philosophers record an anomaly, without questioning the validity of the paradigm. Instead, they propose minor adjustments, leaving the scheme's functioning unchanged.



Institutional theories – or rather, contextual theories – insist on the relation between artworks and a *status*-validating framework, the “context”. So what does context specify? My proposal follows from Dickie’s (1969) and Danto’s (1964, 1992) suggestions<sup>3</sup> and recalls Carroll’s (1994) narrative theory and Levinson’s (1979) historical oriented account. The context comprises a sociological dimension – defining procedures that assign artistic *status* – and a historically determined world inhabited by artistic and aesthetic theories that train the eye to watch contemporary productions: a social institution and a cultural atmosphere – a rule and its meaning, container and contents, syntax and semantic.

Yanal’s (1998) account describes the context as a set of practices and intentions rooted in a social and cultural domain. He is right, yet the definition seems too broad. The context is made of conventions (among which are artistic techniques, perceptive conventions &c....) and procedures for *status* attribution. Procedures define semantic domains – the “discourse of reasons” (Danto, 1992, p.46) for ontological attributions, the set of thoughts that drives the artist’s or the insider’s reflections – and syntactical structures – models of act that allow for *status* attributions<sup>4</sup>. Syntax and semantic are mutually inflected: syntactical structures ensure *status* attribution under proper reasons, while semantic domains rely on the issuing of syntactical structures – thereby neutralising Wollheim’s claim (1984). Such procedures are enacted by qualified insiders that inhabit the framework.

## Facing anomalies

Abrams’ paradigm accommodates almost every theoretical account explaining art phenomena – including the revolutionary instances of the ’60s, with just a minor change. Yet, art practice is showing essential transformations which the paradigm does not account for. Three main changes attract my attention, suggesting theoretical issues that can eventually break Abrams’s quite perfect construction.

Artworks – as outputs of an accurate artistic research – become ephemeral entities which modify their very ontological structure. *E-flux* was founded by Anton Vidokle and Julieta Aranda, when they organized *The Best Surprise is No Surprise* (1998), an exhibition at a Holiday Inn in San Francisco. At that time, Vidokle had just opened his first email account and he decided to send some exhibition invitations to his friends. The opening was outstanding. They had a right intuition: internet could spread invitations all around the world and, at the same time, become an archive of past events. This is *e-flux*, both a service for art institutions and a comprehensive collection of press releases and today, also a publishing company. Nobody argues that *e-flux* is an artwork, yet some claim its artistic *status* (Foster et al., 2004). It recalls conceptualism – the idea that artworks are a particular piece of reflexive information, that artworks are nothing but comments on art, as Kosuth posits (1968). It insists on conditions of art production – the art project produces its own

existence conditions. As Vidokle posits "I would say that *e-flux* is [...] closer to a long-term artists' project" (Obrist et al., 2007, p.18).

Artworks become projects – a terminological transformation that records an ontological modification. The project, as Claire Bishop (2012) argues, recalls an open process that alters with a participative collaboration, as opposed to artworks as finite objects. An anomaly in the paradigm therefore appears: a decentralisation of artworks encompasses a fluid temporality and the space of production is virtually unlimited. Equally, the project points out the underlying ongoing artistic research, as though artworks were leftovers of a comprehensive research. The project reflects a defined netjuyh of knowledge, roles, actors and skills. Again, "our attention is [...] shifted away from the production of a work (including a work of art) onto life in the art project – a life that is not primarily a productive process" (Groys, 2010, p.78). Groys underlies biopolitical urgencies, arguing that art is becoming a life-managing technique. Nevertheless, both Groys and Bishop manifest attitudes that are redefining artworld behaviors following Boltanski's and Chiapello's (1999) notes on the relation between connective capitalism and art as project.

*David Hammons: The Unauthorized Retrospective* (2006) is an exhibition curated by the curatorial collective 'Triple Candie'. It includes color as well as black and white copies of Hammons' artworks taken from existing reproductions in exhibition catalogues or websites. No artworks are in the show. Peter Nesbett and Shally Bancroft founded the curatorial collective in 2001, although they unveiled a new type of exhibition-making in 2006: *artless* exhibitions. Their activity focuses on the power that interference institutions are responsible for and it displays the process of ascribing value to an artist's work. Their political attitude follows Agamben's (2007) call to arms: profaning the unprofanable is the political task of the coming generation. They show how art discourse is independent from materialisation or dematerialisation of artworks, revealing the autonomy of curators' activities.

Curators have been equated with artists. Wilde (1891) predicted something similar when he highlighted an increasing predominance of discourse in art production before the 20<sup>th</sup> century *avant-gardes'* and Wolfe's (1975) suggestion that "these days, without a theory to go with it, I can't see a painting" (p.2). As Wilde argues, the critic – or rather the curator – as artist specifies the autonomy of curator in producing legitimising reasons for seeing something as art. Contemporary art – as Senaldi (2012) and Dal Lago and Giordano (2006), to name a few, stated – is intrinsically related with the discourse on itself. So, if – thanks to such a discourse – one can recognise artistic value in objects and actions and the curator is the author of the discourse, then the curator is a demiurge. The curator endorses artists' productions since he provides semantic reasons using specific types of syntactic structures, conferring peculiar ontological *status* upon them. Indeed, curators have a creative role. As Becker (1974) argues, artistic production is a collective activity, since a great part is played by the creation of artistic value (see also Balzer, 2015). In Bourdieu's (1993) words, "the production of discourse about the work of art is one

of the conditions of production of the work” (p.35). There has been a fundamental change: curators do not only take care of artworks, they collaborate in the creation and their discourse has a performative power.

Ultimately, such changes reveal a progressive autonomy of curators’ activity from past duties. Curators, independent and charismatic figures (see Richter, 2013), are anomalies: their performative activity is not accounted for in Abrams’ scheme. A theoretical reflection on exhibition-making is required since exhibitions express autonomous researches rather than display discrete artworks. In other words, artistic practices are expressed in various forms; artworks are one choice among others.

Market, as a key actor, suggests another anomaly in Abrams’ paradigm functioning. Artist Lee Lozano used to say that action was in the extreme. Her performative pieces – dipped in minimalist and conceptualist commitments – coincided with self-sacrifice: *General Strike Piece* (1969) signs her dismissal from artworld – she rejected an invitation for a solo curated by Dick Bellamy – and from New York life in general. Her career was built on denials, however her recent rediscovery shows that nothing sells more than denials: “Lozano’s rediscovery by the artworld, as much as her withdrawal from it, belongs to a larger market dynamic” (Siegel, 2008, p. 391). The story is simple: gallerist Mitchell Algu in 1998 organises a Lozano solo after several decades. Here, critic Bob Nickas meets her work and proposes a drawings exhibition at MoMA P.S.1 in January 2004. Such moves would probably have gone unnoticed had Hauser & Wirth, one of world’s leading art galleries, not acquired Lozano’s estate. As Siegel (2008) argues, “press hardly matters if not accompanied by the right gallery context” (330).

Lozano’s rediscovery is one among many other stories. It shows the power of market in shaping art history and attributing artistic value. As Bourdieu (1993) argues, alongside the pursuit of ‘economic’ profit [...] there is also room for the accumulation of symbolic capital” (p.75). Symbolic capital determines economic value and *vice versa*, at the point that “success in market terms justifies and validates anything, replacing all the theories” (Houellebecq, 2011, p.219; see also Ullrich, 2009). Art value is an extrinsic property (see Varzi, 2008): it requires for its existence the presence of observers. In other words, the *circle of belief* (Bourdieu, 1993) – those who recognise an artist’s value or create it – warrants such value, sustaining artworld’s productions by construing a shared belief in the distinctness of art objects and in the legitimising discourse held by artworld’s members. Value rests on the ongoing artistic research (while the artwork is merely a leftover), on the ability to create relationships and maintain a constant presence in artworld rituals. As stated by Steyerl (2016) “contemporary economy of art relies more on presence than on traditional ideas of labour power tied to the production of objects”. Moreover, “the art sells the artist, and its price is directly connected to the added value associated with the artist’s media profile” (Davies & Ford, 1998, p.3). Such dynamics reinforce the decentralisation of artworks thus refocusing artworld’s primary urgencies. Again,



here, Abram's paradigm is ineffective. Its semantic boundaries exclude market as an object of theoretical interest – maybe following the Cartesian distinction or resting of Christian separation between spiritual and material. Yet, market is a main actor in the system and its presence is influencing art history.

## Conclusions

These three examples should provide ideas for further research. Primarily, it seems that Abram's paradigm must be abandoned since the two *dogmas* are irreconcilable: artworlds' recent events checkmate their validity. The centrality of artworks – both in theoretical research and artists' productions – is denied in many ways. Artists' concerns turn away from the production of objects; curators care more about their own artistic research while art market rests on new kind of economies – reputational economy, cognitive economy and economy of presence. The primacy of a biunivocal relation, on the other hand, does not account for the complexity of artworld dynamics, while only an inflected and circular reflection accounts for a circular social phenomenon. I hope my analysis has highlighted this.

A new paradigm might be proposed. The artwork should be understood merely as one of artworld's output – not the most important one. Decentralised artworks allow for a deeper reflection on artworld's dynamics and an understanding of the nature of its internal relations, actors and ways of attributing values. Moreover, a theoretical analysis of the market's procedures and its power is required for an appropriate understanding of art phenomena; yet, insiders ask for theoretical tools beyond preconceptions.

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