



# **Aspects of Belgian art after 1945** **Part I**

**Willem Elias**

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## Foreword

Above all else, I take Professor Elias's book to be fundamentally about appreciating art, specifically, Belgian art. Explicitly, his book is a series of acts of appreciation for what Belgian artists provide the world. Implicitly, his book is also a sophisticated demonstration and analysis-in-practice of the complex endeavor of deeply appreciating.

Stein Olsen (1988) defines *appreciation*, as it is used in art criticism and literary criticism, as "the act of apprehending a work of art with enjoyment" (p. 66). The concept of 'appreciation' overlaps with concepts of 'interpretation', 'perception', and 'reflection'; it entails valuing, positive or negative. Appreciation is dependent on acquired perception that requires a long process of initiation and practice. It also involves training one's sensibilities and learning how to apply apt vocabulary to distinguish what aspects of a thing one is appreciating. Succinctly, appreciation requires knowledge. Olsen's definition is reminiscent of Harry Broudy's (1972) "enlightened cherishing" – "a love of objects and actions that by certain norms and standards are worthy of our love. It is a love that knowledge justifies" (p. 6).

Elias's writing exemplifies qualities of insightful interpretation based on considerable prior knowledge, acute perception, and thoughtful reflection. Elias's appreciation is deeply contextual, personal, and socially committed. Elias's work resists 18th century attitudes of "aesthetic disinterest" as advocated by William Shaftesbury, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and in the 20th century by Edward Bullough, Monroe Beardsley, and Jerome Stolnitz. Such aesthetic attitude theories conceive of aesthetic experience as an "episode of exceptional elevation wholly beyond our ordinary understanding of empirical reality" (Honderich, 1998, p. 8), independent of utility, economic value, moral judgment, or personal emotion.

George Dickie (1997) offers a succinct and dismissively sarcastic summary of such notions of 'aesthetic experience':

The traditional picture of the aesthetic experience of a work of art goes like this: the work and the person or subject who is experiencing it are surrounded by an impenetrable, psychological wall "secreted" by the subject that experientially nullifies all relations that the work has to things outside the experience. Aspects of works of art may, and frequently do, refer, but a 'proper' subject of aesthetic experience cannot take account of such references. (p. 156)

Elias's appreciation is also distinct from a too common "fear of analysis and interpretation". Some fear that overanalyzing of a work will kill it. Richard Feynman (1999), the recipient of the 1965 Nobel Prize in Physics for his research in quantum electrodynamics, rebuts his artist friend who maintains that a scientist could only take apart a beautiful thing, like a flower, and cannot appreciate its beauty. To the contrary, Feynman argues:

"I can appreciate the beauty of the flower. At the same time I see much more about the flower than he sees. I can imagine the cells in there, the complicated actions inside which also have beauty. I mean it's not just beauty at this dimension of one centimeter, there is also beauty at a smaller dimension, the inner structure. Also the process, the fact

that the colors in the flower evolved in order to attract insects to pollinate. It is interesting — it means that insects can see color... a science knowledge only adds to the excitement and mystery and the awe of a flower. It only adds; I don't understand how it subtracts" (p. 2).

There is a related fear of "over-interpreting" a work of art, or "reading too much into it". Jonathan Culler (1990) acknowledges the fear, but is more fearful of under-interpretation, that is, a failure to interpret enough: "Many of the most interesting forms of modern criticism ask not what the work has in mind but what it forgets, not what it says but what it takes for granted" (p. 115).

Elias reveals no such fears of interpretation; rather he believes, along with Arthur Danto (1994), that a work of art only exists to the extent that it is interpreted. In sympathy with Nelson Goodman (1978), Elias asserts that without interpreting a work, we will not know of and cannot benefit from the knowledge about the world a work brings to us.

Current criticism, including Elias's, is more often than not socially critical, informed by feminism, multiculturalism, Orientalism, colonialism, queer theory, each of which merges aesthetic and ethical concerns, and rejects "distancing" oneself in the face of any art. All art is subject to moral concerns and political criticism. To deny the social content of Belgian art, especially that which is expressly made as political work, would be to miss its point. Elias does not permit us this luxury of complacent and naive ignorance.

Elias, as an art educator, writes so as to change our lives through personal as well as scholarly engagement with Belgian art. Hans Gadamer (1989), in the Hegelian tradition, asserts that responding to art is a mode of self-understanding. He writes, "Our experience of the aesthetic too is a mode of self-understanding. Self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self, and includes the unity and integrity of the other. Since we meet the artwork in the world and encounter a world in the individual artwork, the work of art is not some alien universe into which we are magically transported for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in and through it (...). (cited in Korsmeyer, 1998, p. 92)

Further, Gadamer argues, "the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it" (p. 93).

Within American Pragmatism, Richard Rorty argues that there should be no difference between appreciating a work and using it to better one's life. For Rorty, a meaningful engagement with a work of art is one that causes one to rearrange one's priorities and to change one's life. "Interpreting something, knowing it, penetrating to its essence, and so on are all just various ways of describing some process of putting it to work... We pragmatists relish this way of blurring the distinction between finding an object and making it" (cited in Barrett, 2003, p. 221).

Concomitant with greater self-knowledge and resulting appreciation of the changing self, one can also come to better know and appreciate others through their interpretations. To read or hear others' interpretations provides the possibility of learning something about those interpreters as well as the work. It is to know how they



think, what they notice, what they value and why. Other interpreters' thoughts, in turn, can enlighten readers about similarities and differences in appreciating specific things, in constructing new views of the world through the works of Belgian artists, and how we understand and appreciate the knowledge and experiences they provide.

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