

Otherwise known as art

Michael Young

1. An object is defined by its relations.
2. Ethics and Epistemology are the basis for Aesthetic judgment.

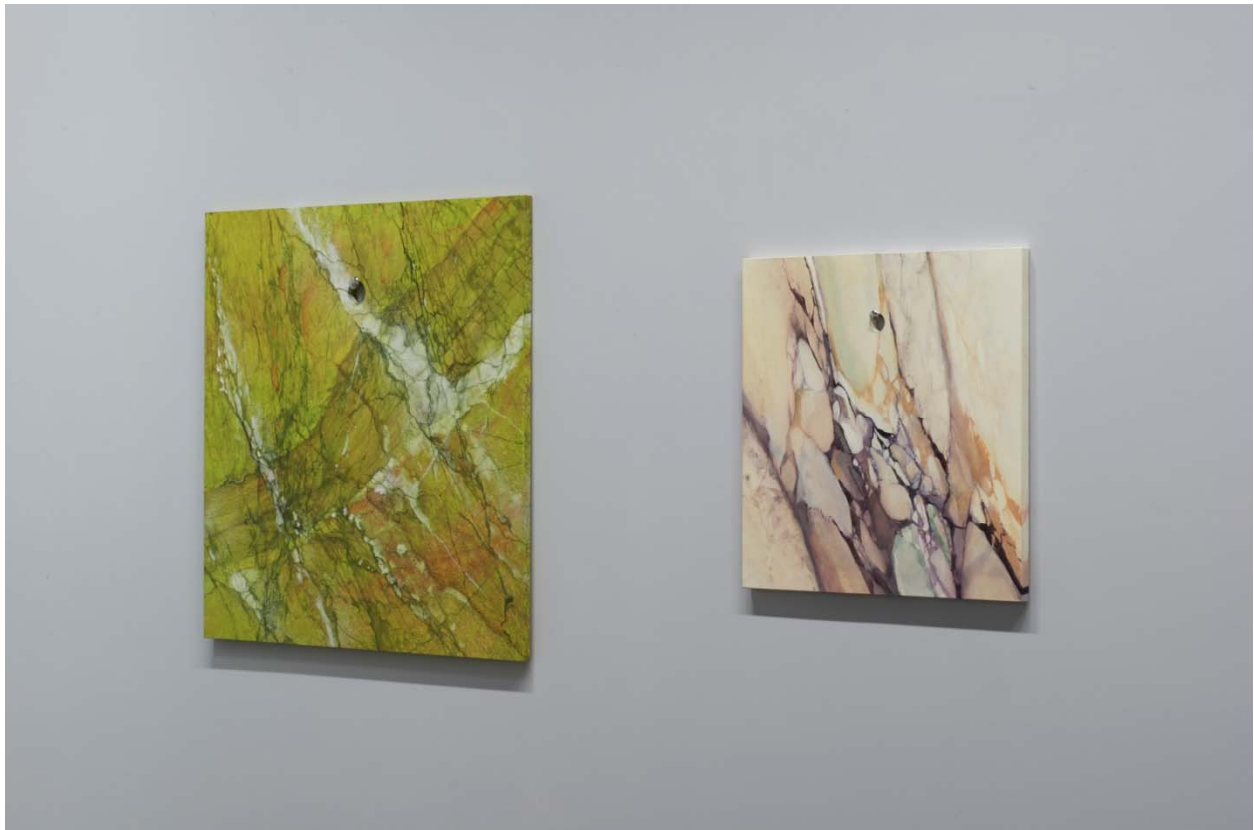
These two seemingly innocuous statements are often implicit in discussions of art. A simple rephrasing of these statements could be as follows: 1. An art object gains meaning and is understood completely through the relations it produces; 2. The basis for appreciating its qualities depends on the knowledge and values of the interpreting individual. Few would dispute these claims as stated. Art criticism is built on describing the historical, material, technical, social, and perceptual relationships that can be extracted from a work of art. This discourse recognizes that the modes of accessing and gaining knowledge about reality (epistemology) and the values of the artist/viewer of the work (ethics) are of primary importance for a critical understanding of an aesthetic experience. My reason for underscoring these rather commonplace ideas is not to reject or dismiss them as unfounded assumptions, but instead to suggest that we can begin to doubt their apparent foundational solidity. I will argue that objects are never determined completely by their relations and that aesthetics is not a secondary mode of engaging the world but a primary one, on equal footing with epistemology and ethics.ⁱ One of the main instances that have led me to doubt the statements above is the project of Harmen Brethouwer.

An artist's body of work is often referred to as a singular effort regardless of its degree of cohesion, but in Mr. Brethouwer's case, the collection of art objects he has produced over almost 25 years can only be considered as a single artistic act, a career-spanning project in the truest sense. The "Brethouwer Project" consists of the production of two forms, and only two forms: a conical sculptural object and a square wall-mounted panel. These objects are altered in their scale, material, ornament, and context. This combination of minimal mute forms with the ornamental excess of craft practices produces strange and variable relations with the cultural contexts they encounter. The production of a decorated minimalism may initially seem to be a questionable venture. But in the work of Brethouwer, this combination creates a conceptual tension: the objects can never be reduced to their decorative traditions or to their perceptual bluntness.

The devaluing of craft technique is one of the key narratives running through 20th-century art. Whether this was motivated by an attack on classical academic training, a desire to give free expression to the inner psyche, or an effort to detach art from material production in order to privilege theoretical content, modern art rejected associations with the traditions of craft. Contrary to this tendency, in Brethouwer's work we have an extreme version of traditional craft. Examples range from silver filigree threading to faux marble painting, from ancient Japanese lacquering to silk embroidery, from crystal glass casting to tortoise-shell inlay. His use of these traditions is not a nostalgic lament for lost craft or traditional artisanal values; it is instead a radical conceptual stance. No matter what the material, the decoration, the culture, the time period, the cones remain cones, the square panels remain square panels. This formal recurrence severs a relation between craft technique, material articulation, and object function—and yet the articulations of these cones and panels resist being read as arbitrary surface appliqué to their respective forms. Instead, the combination of formal repetition with ornamental articulation estrange the objects towards alternate scenarios.

In film and literature, a scene can operate more as descriptive fragment, often disruptive to the smooth flow of a narrative whole. Each object that Brethouwer creates comes with a cultural back story. These stories create contexts for the objects, of which the object acts as a fragment, a scene ruptured out of a cultural continuity. Take for instance the *False Abstracts* series from 2007-2008. These panels are painted with a faux marble texture traditionally used to give a plaster wall the appearance of stone. For the *False Abstracts* series, the craftsmen and women were asked to paint on panels ranging from 50cm to 100cm square, and to consider these panels as individual pieces in a fine art setting. This shifts attention from the traditional craft of what is commonly understood to be the background of a room to the foreground of an art object. It also shifts the painter's intention for how their craft will be interpreted. At first the works look like real material objects held just off the wall, swatches in a material showroom presenting options for cladding interior surfaces. On closer examination, they begin to look fake in relation to implied materiality as it becomes clear that they are paintings intentionally tricking the observer. Let us pause a moment and consider this. By looking like real

stone, they suggest a raw materiality, not an intentionally manipulated art object. By looking like painting, they betray their actual material construction in oil or acrylic. Once they are understood as paintings, the lack of representational form or figure begins to suggest abstract expressionism. But these are not attempts to represent some spiritual, conceptual, or psychological essence; they are "just" technically masterful craft objects actually attempting to represent real material. If a material simulation can be mistaken for artistic expressive intention, then the standard interpretive relationship toward the art object is placed in serious doubt. In this manner the line between realism and abstraction is called into question, as is the line between formal craft training and subjective personal expression. These objects become things unto themselves that cannot be exhausted by the relations to which they allude. They become also scenes that refuse to dissolve into a single narrative. And this tension, this inability to determine exactly what relation to the object the viewer should have conceptually and perceptually, places emphasis on the aesthetic experience itself.



Harmen Brethouwer with Karin van der Lem, *Ming*, 2008 & Michael van de Laar, *Breche Violet*, 2008

This leads me to the second assumption, that aesthetics is based on epistemology and/or ethics. This secondary status is where most people feel comfortable locating aesthetics. It is only after one establishes what exists, how we gain knowledge of it, and what actions this knowledge affords that we ask questions regarding pleasure and beauty. This sequence seems rational, responsible, and rigorous. Aesthetics is too tainted with the subjective or with the surface styles of a commodity culture to be trusted as a primary act. At first glance, Brethouwer's objects support this sequence. Each piece requires a tremendous amount of research into material qualities, decorative motifs, and specific craft techniques. This knowledge is necessary not only for the object's creation; it also enriches the viewer's understanding of the artwork. However, these objects are not a devout tribute to traditional craft; they have instead an aesthetic of qualitative allusion that uses human culture as a material basis. It is almost as if the entire history of human cultural production is treated as a found object, a readymade, sampled, extracted, and reused. These objects posit the knowledge of human culture

(epistemology) and the techniques of material craft (ethics) as the subject of art, and by this emphasis, almost in spite of it, they begin to produce a doubt regarding any essential connection between epistemology/ethics and aesthetics.

Traditional craft aesthetics are steeped in ethical justifications. A craftsman should be faithful to a tradition, honest in expressing material and technique, and true to the function of the object. If the craftsman follows the ethics of craft, aesthetic success will follow. Brethouwer, on the other hand, uses the traditions of craft to present an aesthetic richness severed from the assumptions of this ethical foundation. His objects have no function, they use traditional techniques in very untraditional ways, materiality is constantly shifting associations, and the different varieties in decorative motifs have negligible impact on the form of the objects. It is worth reiterating that this aesthetic is achieved not by rejecting or negating traditional crafts, but by openly engaging the traditions with painstakingly thorough respect. The provocative logical extension of this observation is to begin to doubt if the formula of aesthetics based on ethics has ever been completely accurate. Brethouwer's collection of objects draws attention to the fact that most craftsmen manipulate materials to appear as something they are not, hide their technique as much as they expose it, continually make objects of questionable functionality, and constantly take license to distort decorative motifs. In all of these decisions the aesthetic of the object, rather than blind adherence to an ethical ideal, guides the work.

Epistemology as a basis for aesthetic judgment can be understood in several ways. It can refer to knowledge of an historical lineage of references internal to an artistic medium. It can refer to the conventions of language as a structuring of thought, discourse, and articulation. It can also refer to the ways in which the senses provide data that mediates perceptual experience. Regardless of the mode, epistemology as a basis for aesthetics stresses the importance of critical consciousness for a well-grounded aesthetic interpretation. Awareness of the ways in which an artwork communicates meaning requires knowledge of the cultural and physical systems that mediate reality. Brethouwer does not reject epistemology as a mode of engaging the world, or the importance of cultural knowledge for engaging an artwork. As mentioned above, his work is an amazing trove of research into the multitudes of cultural production. Yet, just as his artwork provokes doubt about the ethical foundations of aesthetics, it also provokes doubt about epistemology as the basis for aesthetics. In each of his objects, the scenarios that provide the background associations create a tension with the aesthetic response. Knowledge of these scenarios doesn't justify or explain the objects; rather, they produce a context that disturbs the objects, and the objects themselves return the favor by disturbing their contexts.

An example of this condition can be found in the cone object titled *Improved Flowers* from 2007. The surface of this earthenware object is painted with motifs of four different flowers of symbolic importance in Chinese culture. The lotus signifies purity, the peony riches and honor, the chrysanthemum conviviality, and the orchid love; for a person familiar with the symbolic content, there is a whole host of meanings that can be interpreted. If one has no knowledge of this tradition of symbolism in East Asian culture, these meanings are absent. Brethouwer takes this arbitrary assignation of meaning through symbolism to the next step. Each flower is represented in three manners on the cone: the realistic painting in the large cartouches, the emblematic rendering of the same flowers in the upper cartouches, and the decorative rendering used for the pattern on the fond. The flowers are rendered through three distinct conventions of mediation, but what they actually represent are images of flowers that have been aesthetically modified, "improved", to become closer in their formal legibility to their symbolic abstraction. Thus these idealized images are attempts to alter real natural material through the intensification and clarification of qualitative aspects of cultural symbolism. Brethouwer then goes the extra step by working with a scientist specializing in the genetic modification of plants to see how it might be possible if these improvements could be done in reality. *Improved Flowers* as a conceptual project is actually asking abstraction to reverse direction and move back out into the world to alter reality along aesthetic criteria, a cultural "improvement" in aesthetics becomes the grounds for an "improvement" of nature in reality. This is in effect a critique of one of aesthetic theory's long discounted, but still simmering beliefs that views the artist as someone who moves beyond the natural as found towards a more perfect beauty through conventions of representation. These improved flowers are unable to sit comfortably in academic, decorative, or realist conventions. And, through this, questions are raised about where representation and reality diverge. The argument of an epistemological grounding for aesthetics privileges the understanding of how conventions mediate reality, providing a basis for judgment of the relations between reality and its representation. This position places aesthetics as a secondary condition dependent on this knowledge. But, if one is unable to divide reality cleanly from its representation, or if realism is seen to be as abstract a construct as decoration, then no quantity of knowledge will equal or fully explain the qualities of the aesthetic experience.



Harmen Brethouwer, Improved Flowers, 2007

Once this tension between representation and reality has been established, aesthetics becomes a primary mode of relation between objects, on equal footing of other modes. Aesthetics does not attempt a reduction of experience to prior knowledge; it is active right at the juncture where one cannot equate the sensations of experience with the understanding of what one perceives. What Harmen Brethouwer's objects produce is exactly this gap between things and their contexts, between reality and its representation, between sensation and knowledge. And in the production of this gap, he has reconfigured how we understand the inheritance of our cultural history of aesthetic objects. That is otherwise known as art.

¹ The primary source for these arguments are the recent writings of Graham Harman and Steven Shaviro.

See the following publications for further information:

Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011)

Graham Harman, *Weird Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2012)

Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014)