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Jeffrey Strayer *Subjects and Objects: Art, Essentialism, and Abstraction*. Boston: Brill Academic Publishers 2007. Pp. 388. \$129.00 (Cloth: ISBN: 900415714X)

Until recently, little has been written in philosophy about very abstract artwork. This year sees a welcome addition to research into the topic in the publication of *Subjects and Objects: Art, Essentialism, and Abstraction* (hereafter *Subjects and Objects*) by Jeffrey Strayer. In addition to being a philosopher – Strayer is a Continuing Lecturer in Philosophy at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne – he is also an artist, holding an M.F.A. from the Art Institute of Chicago, so he is ideally qualified to write this book. In fact, the book could be a propaedeutic for the making of future abstract artworks. At times it reads like an elaborate theory of art, though where art theories tend to start from common properties shared by already existing artworks, *Subjects and Objects* lays a groundwork for a metaphysics of artworks. This is an extraordinarily ambitious work.

Throughout the book, ‘Abstraction’ is capitalized to highlight Strayer’s specific meaning. Where ‘abstract’ can have many somewhat different meanings depending on the context, the capitalized version, ‘Abstract,’ is Strayer’s term of art for minimalizing or reducing inessential elements of an artwork. The ‘Essentialism’ of the title refers to the artistic agenda whereby the artist seeks to remove everything possible from an artwork while leaving the essential aesthetic elements intact. ‘Abstraction’ is the action performed by the ‘Essentialist,’ hence, the full term for the artistic project of relentless reduction of elements to bare essentials is ‘Essentialist Abstraction,’ or ‘Essentialism’ for short. Strayer further distinguishes between the artistic project – which is to actually create Essentialist artworks – and the philosophical project – which is to conceptually examine what the boundaries would be of such an artistic enterprise. Strayer thus links philosophy and art together: the philosopher lays the groundwork for the artist. *Subjects and Objects* seeks nothing less than to provide the philosophical side of that link.

The book is very meticulously planned and organized. After an Introduction where the project is defined and described, there are four parts, each dealing with major dimensions, with parts two and three having four divisions each, and all arranged into numbered sections. Because

of this, it is very easy to refer back to previous sections, and the index is also helpful for this purpose. Part One deals with terminology as well as the way Essentialist Abstraction arises historically through the gradual development toward more and more Abstract artworks. Part Two treats the making and apprehending of artworks in general. Part Three analyzes a myriad of possible relationships involved with ‘artistic complexes’, another term of art for the connection between the subject’s awareness and an art object. The book here reaches new levels of complexity as Strayer painstakingly examines the many forms of awareness a subject can have. Part Four then pulls together all that has been said previously and includes further discussion on the effects of language on specification and comprehension of art objects. Following the four parts are four appendices which deal with various aspects of objects as such (e.g., Leibniz’s Law, Law’s of Identity and Difference, Impossible Objects, etc.).

Early in the book, Strayer helpfully compares Essentialism with Modernism, arguing that whereas Modernism explores each art form’s boundaries, Essentialism’s mission is to encourage all art forms to become as abstract as possible (30-1). This comparison makes one point of the book come into sharper focus: to delineate and encourage a robust abstract art movement. There are a host of fascinating examples of artworks here, including Vito Acconci, who in one work rubbed his arm to create a sore; Robert Barry, whose work frequently specifies thoughts he has and has not been thinking; and Chris Burden whose works *Shoot* called for him to be shot in the arm and *Bed Piece* had him lie in a bed in the center of a gallery. In addition, there are many descriptively vivid examples from more well-known 20th Century artworld figures including Yves Klein, Marcel Duchamp, Kasimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, Pablo Picasso, Dan Flavin, and Joseph Kosuth. While many methods of artmaking are discussed, one gets the distinct impression that Conceptual art is the favored media for Essentialism.

Strayer’s presentational style, which is to methodically lay out a definition and follow it with examples, is consistent with his fastidious argumentation. For instance, at 11.2, p. 282, he explains that objects can be continuously dependent on awareness in two ways: first, when the object is that object at two or more contiguous times, and the object is either an event of awareness or an independent existential object; second, when the object is identity-dependent on

an event of awareness at two or more contiguous times, but is not metaphysically equivalent to that awareness. Examples of the first kind of continuous object would be pains and trees (notice that pains are themselves events of awareness, trees are independent of awareness, and both are continuous over time), and examples of the second would be paintings and the referent of *the effects of your attending to this for the next six seconds* (notice that paintings depend on events of awareness but are not metaphysically identical with them, and the language is referring to phenomena that are likewise dependent on, but not metaphysically equivalent to, events of awareness).

Reading *Subjects and Objects* can be an experience a bit like reading a technical manual; however the philosophical themes and conceptual illustrations are often very stimulating. About half of the examples refer to existing works (some widely known from painting or sculpture or theatre; others fairly well-known from the Conceptual art world) and the other half are Strayer's own conceptual works. All of the conceptual works are written in italics. These run from the very simple, almost quaint, like *your current event of comprehending this* for instance, to show how a work of art can be completely dependent on no more than one event of awareness, to the maddeningly complex, like *any object that is in no way dependent on awareness and of which it is neither possible to be aware nor possible to know that some object is that object* (230). In addition to the usual definition plus examples, many sections go on to extend and interweave previous definitions to explore further avenues an Essentialist might explore.

Subjects and Objects is a dense and important book. No one until now, in the histories of philosophy or art, has attempted to answer the main questions this book raises, specifically, 'Are there limits to Abstraction in art, and if there are, what are they?' *Subjects and Objects* is a work of art in its own right, in the descriptive *and* the commendatory sense. That is, to understand *Subjects and Objects* properly, to 'get' all there is to 'get' from it, one must appreciate the sheer audaciousness, precision, and complexity of it. That someone would even attempt such a thing, pulling together this immense amount of detail with subtle care and exactness, is a little like one of those stories about some quiet, unknown genius who soldiers on alone at the margins, until one day he suddenly explodes onto the scene with a sculpture of a full size Empire State Building

made completely out of paper clips. This imaginary example seems an apt analogy for what Jeffrey Strayer has done here. That someone would even do it at all is amazing; that someone could do it so well is simply breathtaking.

Arguably some things had to be left out that it would have been interesting to include. One might have liked, for instance, some examples from feminist and multicultural artists, but perhaps including such material would have been distracting to the book's stated aim. This is a substantial book thick with detail and fine-tuned thought. Though *Subjects and Objects* would be too difficult for an introduction to philosophy of art or basic undergraduate aesthetics course, it is an original work of scholarship that should (if there is any justice in the world) spark interest in an area of aesthetics that has seen too little attention. As such, *Subjects and Objects* would make an excellent text for a graduate seminar in the philosophy of modern art, and an intense experience for any suitably cerebral contemporary artist or Conceptual art lover who is serious about the question of how abstract an artwork can get and still be considered a candidate for being included in the category 'Art.'

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