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Cyclepedia and the Museology of Things

In June 2013, the Portland Art Museum (PAM) opened the third show in its design series, *Cyclepedia*, an exhibition of forty bicycles from Michael Embacher's collection. The first two shows were *China Design Now* and *The Allure of the Automobile*. The first show included design categories like graphic art, fashion, and architecture and so fit with standard museological categories. In contrast, the second two shows had functional cars and then bicycles, designed to be used as such, displayed in a museum. Is this simply a case of briefly highlighting the artistic aspects of industrial design or craftsmanship? Or are these objects elevated to high art status by this placement? Do bicycles belong in an art museum?

In Oregon Artswatch, an article was written in the form of a humorous mock trial of the exhibit.¹ The premise was that the "prosecution" had found a retailer inside the hallowed halls of the museum and attempted to buy the products displayed there. Once they determined it was a show, they accused the exhibition of being in violation of "The Articles of Artistic Validity" which state that a design show must clearly explain the value or cultural significance of a functional object on display. The "defense" argues precedence (In the *Allure of the Automobile* show the museum displayed collector cars; curator Ken Gross described the cars as sculptures)² and that the bicycles may also qualify as Duchampian readymades. After some back and forth, the argument concludes with the defense arguing that the culture of the audience may be represented, and therefore the bicycles could have cultural significance.

1. *Art Court's in Session: The case of the bicycle as art*, accessed November 7, 2014, <http://www.orartswatch.org/art-courts-in-session-the-case-of-the-bicycle-as-art/>

2. *Portland Art Museum Exhibits Cars as Art in 'The Allure of the Automobile'*, accessed November 7, 2014, <http://www.opb.org/artsandlife/article/portland-art-museum-exhibits-cars-art-allure-automobile/>

ARTnews published a much less critical article³ about bicycles in art museums, providing many examples of shows in art and design museums. This article argues that bicycles are an object of design and also of personal expression, and that bicycles are an “exquisite mix of engineering, craftsmanship, and style.” The article predicts that the shows mentioned are the beginning of a trend that both museums and artists are following.

I will argue in this paper that bicycles are not Art (with a capital A, i.e. high art e.g. in the category of works by Poussin or Michelangelo or Duchamp) but are art in terms of craftsmanship and design, and that as part of our local visual culture deserve to be in the museum. I’ll look at some categories one might fit the show into, such as painted representations of bicycles, art works made from bicycles, readymades, or just esthetic objects worthy of viewing as art. Finally I’ll argue that by re-contextualizing designed or crafted things (either through antiquity, history, rarity, or cultural significance), they can become museum-worthy, even if they are not Art. A visual studies approach reveals that things like bicycles can be capable of esthetic and cultural value even if they aren’t part of that privileged set of artifacts called art.⁴

1 What Art is

What is art? Arthur Danto says that art was thought to be imitation, for a long period of time (the Platonic version of art, which lasted until 1905-7,⁵ with the Fauves and Cubism) but that studying modern art we have learned that almost anything can be art (as in the art of Joseph Beuys who made art out of fat).⁶ After seeing Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*,

3. Robin Cembalest, *Pedal Pushers: How Art Museums Are Promoting Bike Culture* | ARTnews, accessed November 7, 2014, <http://www.artnews.com/2013/07/18/art-museums-embrace-bicycles/>

4. James Herbert, “Visual Culture/Visual Studies,” in *Critical Terms for Art History* (The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 453

5. Arthur C. Danto, *What Art Is* (Yale University Press, March 2013), xi

6. *ibid.*, xii, 19

Danto decided we had seen the end of art. What he meant by this was just the end of imitative art and the beginning of a new kind of conceptual art. Once this conceptual leap occurred, artists were free to make art that completely went outside the bounds of previous artworks. Because anything can be used as art and artists were increasingly using objects from the *Lebenswelt* (the everyday world) we need to be able to distinguish between everyday objects that are not art and those that are.⁷

Danto explains the philosophical difficulty in determining what art is, presenting the analogy of games, which also have no particular material quality in common that makes them games (e.g. hopscotch, dominos, tic-tac-toe, tag). They do have a family resemblance of some kind. Art presents a similar conundrum. Is art an open concept? What is it that links all things that are art? One attempt to define art was the institutional theory of art from philosopher George Dickie, which states that art is defined by what the art world (curators, critics, collectors, artists) says is art.⁸ This theory is similar to how Donald Preziosi defines art, which he also acknowledges can be almost anything materially speaking.⁹ Preziosi says that art is what museology and museography practice.¹⁰ But, along with Danto I believe this general concept is an unsatisfying definition and leaves too much open. It is a dodge around the problem, rather than an attempt to define art.

Danto believes there because there is no material or visible qualities that all works of art share there must be some invisible quality that links things that are art. Danto's first idea for this link is that all works of art have an "embodied meaning." He also feels there must be some other piece that includes the skill of the artist. His last definition of art is as "wakeful dreams," an idea that needs some unpacking. By this he means that the artwork, be it a dance move (e.g. miming eating a sandwich or ironing a shirt), a readymade, or

7. Danto, *What Art Is*, 19

8. *ibid.*, 31-33

9. "...virtually anything can be deployed as a specimen in a museum" Donald Preziosi, "Collecting/Museums," in *Critical Terms for Art History* (The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 409

10. *ibid.*, 410-411

a Brillo Box, contains an intention for the audience to perceive a certain shared concept, as if the artist and the viewer had both shared in the same wakeful dream.¹¹ This is a definition of art that depends on the intention of the artist, rather than relying on the viewer to supply the meaning. This of course leaves out things like ancient amphorae, arms and armor, and other crafted antiquities, as well as newer forms of art as studied by the discipline of visual studies. However by allowing us to use techniques of visual analysis and other art history techniques on a broader range of objects it can help to make the distinction between what is high art and what can be displayed in a museum, which are two different concepts entirely; and it brings up the question of what the viewer brings to seeing objects of any kind in the museum setting.

2 Bicycle Art

Bicycles are inherently aesthetic and have been featured in art works since their invention. Christoph Asendorf even argues that (along with locomotives) bicycles can be considered erotic in their organic functioning, their repetition of human motions like heartbeats, walking, or breathing.¹² There is certainly a personal connection to bicycles, just because of how they are ridden. As one popular bicycle advocacy phrase goes, “put the fun between your legs.”¹³

It is uncontroversial that a painting of a bicycle can be art. New York artist Taliah Lempert almost exclusively paints bicycles and bicycle parts, and people bring in their bikes for her to paint portraits of them. In most of Lempert’s work, the bicycles are portrayed in the same way as the bicycles in the *Cyclepedia* show: posed, almost as if hanging from

11. Danto, *What Art Is*, 48-52

12. Christoph Asendorf, *Batteries of life : on the history of things and their perception in modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 108-111

13. Zachary Mooradian Furness, ““Put the Fun Between Your Legs!”: The Politics and Counterculture of the Bicycle.” (2006), <http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/10058/>

wires. They are in the pre-modern style, art as imitation, and use traditional materials. These paintings are fine art and are created, bought, and sold within that paradigm. Their commodity value is as art objects, so while they share appearances with the bicycles in the PAM show, they are not also functional objects.

What does it mean to have a portrait made of your bicycle? What relationship does that imply? People can have very personal feelings about their bicycles, almost to the point of fetishism. These feelings are embodied in Lempert's portraits of their bicycles. Portraits are usually of family or loved ones, or famous people. Having a portrait done of one's bicycle implies a special relationship with a thing, an intimacy with an object which transforms it from a utilitarian vehicle into a prized possession or even a reservoir for feelings and memories. There is an almost romantic aspect to this kind of attachment. This indicates that bicycles have such an important place in at least that local culture that they deserve to have portraits made of them. This is another clue to their place in society, and why a show of them is culturally relevant.



Taliah Lempert, *Bob Jackson on Stripes* 7, 2002.

Taliah Lempert, *Jen's Paramount* 16, 2003.

Lempert herself says that bicycles are important and beautiful, and worth looking at closely. The bicycles she paints have been used and ridden. She also states that they are symbols of empowerment.¹⁴ These statements closely parallel the content and intentions of the PAM show, but within a fine art context. In the PAM show, viewers were able and invited to closely examine the collection, with no barriers between the viewers and the bicycles. Though they were actual vehicles and not representations, some of the same ideas should arise in the show's visitors. At least among the members of Portland's bike culture, the fact that there was a show of bicycles in the museum may well have felt like recognition and empowerment, particularly after the show of automobiles.

3 Art From Bicycles

Another way that bicycles can be viewed as art is by reconstructing them, as in works by Picasso, Duchamp, and more recently Ai Weiwei. Picasso's *Bull's Head* is a very simple but brilliant sculpture, composed of a bicycle seat and handlebar. A re-imagining of parts leads to a new way of seeing the parts, a new idea and a clever vision of common pieces. It gives animation and personality to the non-living parts, imbuing them with life.

Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* is likewise extremely simple, composed of a bicycle fork and wheel mounted in a stool. Like Picasso's work, it animates and anthropomorphizes the everyday objects from which it is made. It is a new creation, like a strange animal or robot with a head made from a wheel and the body and legs from the stool.

14. Taliah Lempert, *Statement*, accessed December 4, 2014, <http://www.bicyclepaintings.com/info/statement>



Pablo Picasso, *Bull's Head*, 1943.



Marcel Duchamp *Bicycle Wheel*, 1951.



Ai Weiwei, *Forever Bicycles*, 2013.

Another artist who uses bicycles to make art is Ai Weiwei, whose *Forever Bicycles* is composed of hundreds of bicycles welded together. This form does not reconstruct the parts of a bicycle to make a new form, but instead uses them as a modular piece to make a large-scale sculpture. The monumental forms he creates make the viewer feel as if they are surrounded, encompassed, or within a world of bicycles, as in the streets in a large city

in China. While the meanings he seeks to convey through his art differs from Lempert's romantic, personal, and empowering concepts, the bicycles share the idea of freedom and motion.

These three examples prove that pieces of bicycles, or even whole bicycles re-imagined as modular construction pieces, can be art. They certainly contain embodied meaning, in Danto's sense. But what about the entirely functional bicycles in the PAM show? They have not been altered by an artist with some meaning or intention. They have merely been chosen from a collection and displayed. Does this process of choosing elevate them to art status? Could they at least be considered as readymades?

4 Readymades

Marcel Duchamp's famous *Fountain*, a urinal signed and dated by the artist and placed in a gallery, was a conceptual leap for art. Another example, *In Advance of a Broken Arm* was simply a snow shovel with the title written on the handle. In nominating these commodity objects as art, he caused a re-evaluation of what could be art. Duchamp himself stated that this was his most important contribution to art.¹⁵ Duchamp was rebelling against what he called "retinal" art, art which appealed in the Panofskian sense of art that demands to be appreciated, that appeals to the eye.¹⁶

Is it possible for the bicycles in the PAM exhibition to transcend their functionality by their having been chosen? Marcel Duchamp meant for readymades to be a reaction against art: not aesthetic but an-esthetic. His choices of objects (the urinal, the snow shovel) were deliberately both ordinary objects and also not aesthetic. Since the bicycles in this exhibition were collected and then chosen because they are beautiful or functional or interesting and anything but ordinary they are not readymades in the Duchampian

15. Christoph Asendorf, *Batteries of life*, 214; Danto, *What Art Is*, 26

16. *ibid.*, 25

sense.¹⁷ Their choices were based on other criteria entirely, those of material culture: their rarity, beauty, historical value, or functional or material interest. None of the bicycles on display qualify as quotidian or commodity vehicles, though a few (the Strida, for instance) can be purchased just as they are in the show. Interestingly, people trained to be aesthetes still argue that they see beauty in Duchamp's works, not just for their humor or their embodied meanings. Is there a way to view the bicycles that will transform them into Art?

5 The Viewer's Role

One could argue that the bicycles in the PAM Cyclepedia show can be art if the people viewing them think of them as art. If they bring a particular way of looking at the world (of course a state of mind encouraged by being in the museum environment) then they can view almost anything as artwork. Bourdieu discusses this issue, stating that as Panosky noted it is impossible to determine the point where a technical object becomes an art object, to find the line where form eclipses function.¹⁸

Once art progressed beyond the imitative and into modernity, more was asked of the viewer. To accommodate the fact that the intention of the artist can be applied to any object, the viewer needs to affect a certain mode of viewing, the "aesthetic disposition," which allows people of a certain class and education to be able to see things like a giant block of fat or a shark in a tank, or indeed bicycles hanging from wires, as art. This disposition is class-based, and institutionalized in the art museum.¹⁹ This context makes the viewer pay attention to form rather than function, a perfect setup for being able to appreciate non-art functional objects for their aesthetic value.

17. Danto, *What Art Is*, 25

18. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* [in English], trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, January 1984), 29

19. *ibid.*, 30



Photos (by author) from *Cyclepedia* exhibition at PAM, 2013.

6 Things, or Design, as Art

Viewing the *Cyclepedia* exhibition through the lens of material culture we can see the bicycles as things, in the meaning used by Bill Brown. Removing them from their usual context, one is confronted by their thingness, their materiality and aesthetic qualities.²⁰ By being hung in a museum and presented as an exhibition their functionality is removed and they become not commodity objects but things. We can look through them to con-

20. Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (October 2001): 4, accessed October 7, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344258>

cepts of mobility and freedom, as well as material ideas about craftsmanship, object histories, and use.

Before the ideas of visual culture became current in art history, Bruno Munari argued that everyday objects and design could be art and should be part of life. He said that the things we use should be beautiful; objects as beautiful things.²¹ Viewing design as art, and placing ordinary but designed objects in the museum certainly is not new, as in a MOMA show from 1999 called *Modernstarts: Things*. This show depicted art alongside design, and deliberately removed objects from their normal context, and showed art that was of ordinary things and had an agenda of forcing the re-interpretation of these things for their visual or other abstract qualities.²²

Visual studies allows us to analyze any type of visual artifact, even commodity objects or functional vehicles. It enables us to look at other objects like fashion, shoes, or bicycles and investigate their aesthetic and ideological meanings.²³ Indeed, Michael Embacher said in an interview on KBOO²⁴ that his hope was that people would start riding their bicycles after seeing the show; a definitely ideological stance. In Portland especially, bicycling is promoted by city government, and is part of the city's green culture.

7 Conclusion

Does the owner of the collection himself consider his bicycles to be art? He does not: in an interview on KBOO radio Michael Embacher says that the bicycle is not an art piece but is an excellent example of design, which in turn is an important part of culture and society. Therefore he believes it is appropriate for bicycles to be displayed in a museum.²⁵

21. Bruno Munari, *Design as Art* (Penguin, September 2008), 25

22. Peter Reed, "Seeing Things," *MoMA* 2, no. 10 (December 1999): 3-7, accessed October 7, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4420419>

23. Herbert, "Visual Culture/Visual Studies," 452

24. *Art Focus on 06/11/13* | KBOO, accessed November 7, 2014, <http://kboo.fm/content/artfocuson061113>.

25. *ibid.*

Visitors to the show were certainly viewing the bicycles as design objects, as aesthetic objects, and possibly as art objects. Some portion of the Portland bicycle culture visitors, well-versed in construction techniques, materials, and mechanical workings were certainly looking at the exhibit from a purely design and engineering perspective, as alleged by the Artswatch piece. The context of the museum as well as the education and class standing of some viewers undoubtedly led them to look at the pieces as art objects, even without any intent to embody meaning on the part of the craftspersons who created the vehicles. In spite of this bourgeois ability to affect the aesthetic disposition, the bicycles are still designed and crafted things, but not high art.

Allowing non-art objects into the museum space, and even analyzing non-art objects using the tools of visual culture does not mean the art museum has been reduced to a low-class venue, as W.J.T. Mitchell argues. The distinction between Art and mass culture is not lost by allowing design into the museum. In fact being able to look at both sides of the art/non-art question can help us clarify what we mean by art.²⁶ The bicycles in *Cyclepedia* may be beautiful, and viewers of the show may think of some of them as art, but they are not high art because their makers did not mean them to be and because they do not contain some extra meaning beyond their form and function. They are excellent examples of design and craftsmanship, and have definite connections to contemporary culture and especially to Portland's bicycle culture both politically and in terms of empowerment. For these reasons the show was relevant, and the bicycles as beautiful examples of functional design belonged in the hallowed space of the art museum.

26. W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (August 2002): 172-173, accessed October 7, 2014, <http://vcu.sagepub.com/content/1/2/165>

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