

distance

When one looks at a piece of art, he enters into a relationship with the object. This is a personal relationship, for the observer judges and interprets the delicate creation of another. Here, I will consider only one aspect of aesthetic perception, distance, in relationship to the connection formed between the observer and the work of art. Distance can refer to many things. It can be the actual space between an individual and a thing, or a more philosophic distance, or one that relies on separating oneself mentally from a piece of art. Psychologist and philosopher Edward Bullough offers a psychological approach to the question of aesthetic perception and creates a new type of distance, psychical distance, in his essay, "*Psychical Distance*" as a factor in art and as an aesthetic principle. This distance is related to the notion of contextualization of art and challenges the ideas of the "personal" and "impersonal" approach to considering art.

What is distance? Does one need distance to consider a piece of art? How can an individual truly perceive a work of art? What are the greater-world implications of "distance"? I seek to analyze, interrogate, and challenge Bullough's notion of psychical distance and distance in general, both in and out of a psychological context. These questions serve as a guide to my thinking. I first present a close reading of Bullough's text, and later offer my own critique.

Bullough opens his text by distinguishing spacial, temporal, and psychical distance. He illustrates *his* distance by recounting the experience of being at sea on a

ship immersed in fog. He evaluates the two opposite reactions one could have - either immense fear or great pleasure. "...for most people it is an experience of acute unpleasantness...Nevertheless, a fog at sea can be a source of intense relish and enjoyment" (320-321). Bullough contrasts the colliding experience of an incoming disaster and the apathetic bystander. He says that distance creates this range of experience. "...Distance lies between our own self and such objects as are the sources or vehicles of such affections" (321). For Bullough, distance exists amidst our own being and our experiences. Bullough's distance is an intricate and special place that distinguishes our understanding of art. Bullough says that in our every day life, we do not consider "distance," instead we simply rely on what "makes sense". "...nor are we generally conscious of impressions apart from our own self which is impressed" (321). Art allows us to experience life in a special, elevated way. Distance puts art into the aesthetic consciousness, a space that belongs only to art. It is a space that is not concerned with the rest of the world. For Bullough, distance allows us to see art for what it is worth. "Distance, as I said before, is obtained by separating the object and its appeal from one's own self, by putting it out of gear with practical needs and ends. Thereby the 'contemplation' of the object becomes alone possible" (322). Bullough believes that it is important that art exists outside of normal human experience. Distance is not necessarily either objective or subjective, but it is rather a combination of the two, for it is both personal and impersonal. Bullough describes this dilemma in greater detail, by showing how the distanced view is elevated:

"Distance does not imply an impersonal, purely intellectually interested relation of such a kind...it describes a personal relation, often highly emotionally coloured, but of a peculiar character. Its peculiarity lies in that the personal character of the

relation has been, so to speak, filtered. It has been cleared of the practical, concrete nature of its appeal, without, however, thereby losing its original constitution." (323)

The distanced view of art is not impersonal, per se, but is filtered - it is more "raw," in a sense. Art, insofar as we view it with distance, becomes beautiful, instead of simply being pleasant.

Bullough continues his critique of the personal and the impersonal in the context of the qualities of distance. For Bullough, an important part of "distance" is the fact that it is flexible, unlike the terms used before. It is here where he also expresses his disdain for these terms. "Herein especially lies the advantage of Distance compared with such terms of 'objectivity' and 'detachment.' Neither of them implies a personal relation...and the mere inflexibility and exclusiveness of their opposites render their application generally meaningless" (324). Bullough believes that distance is variable, both in terms of the object in question and the individual considering the object. For Bullough, distance is not static. He asserts that there are degrees of distance. The relationship that distance creates also becomes more evident. "In short, Distance may be said to be variable both according to the distancing-power of the individual, and according to the character of the object" (324). The nature of distance requires that two elements, an observer and an object, be in dialogue with one another. Just as the aesthetic experience is determined by the relationship formed by distance, the loss of distance is also dependent on this relationship.

Bullough describes two types of loss of distance, under and over distancing. "'Under-distancing' is the commonest failing of the subject, an excess of Distance is a frequent failing of Art, especially in the past" (325). For Bullough, the individual usually

under-distances by being super-realistic, whereas the artwork itself tends to over-distance by entering the realm of the insane. "...the verdict in the case of under-distancing is that the work is 'crudely naturalistic,' 'harrowing,' 'repulsive in its realism.' An excess of Distance produces the impression of improbability, artificiality, emptiness or absurdity" (325). Again, the relationship between subject and object is evident, for in the case of loss of distance, both the observer and the work of art are at fault.

Bullough now briefly returns to spacial and temporal distance in art. He notes that only art that affects the ear and the eye have become popular and accepted. "It has been an old problem why the 'arts of the eye and of the ear' should have reached the practically exclusive predominance over arts of other senses" (326). He blames part of this problem on distance, saying that people have a need to be separated from the work of art. Bullough discusses the culinary arts and says that they have never reached the status of "fine art," simply because the subject and object are spatially and temporally connected. He notes that separation has been an important part of aesthetic appreciation.

Bullough now enters his major and final investigation of distance in relationship to the greater aesthetic world. It is in this final section where he makes the claim that the distanced view is the beautiful view. "Distance offers a distinction which is as simple in its operation as it is fundamental in its importance: *the agreeable is a non-distanced pleasure*" (327). This simple but important point opens up into a discussion of higher and lower senses and the appreciation of color. Bullough makes the importance of distance clear. He even says that distance is the primary force behind the creation of art. "Distance, might, indeed, well be considered as the especial and primary function of

what is called the 'creative act' in artistic production..." (330). Bullough says that since mimetic and self-expressive theories are no longer seriously considered, artistic creation is the creation of distance. Art is personal and impersonal and direct and indirect. The artist distances his raw mental content to create art. "It renders questions of origin, of influences, or of purposes almost as meaningless as those of marketable value, of pleasure, even of moral importance, since it lifts the work of Art out of the realm of practical systems and ends" (333). Bullough explicates this relationship and says that art is elevated. Distance remains flexible, fluid, and indefinite. It is distance that makes our view of art special and different from our outlook on life.

Bullough presents a compelling notion of perception, as it questions *how* an individual interacts with a work of art. Bullough's idea of the aesthetic consciousness is particularly appealing, since it identifies art as something extraordinary. Instead of Dickie's more cynical institutional theory, in which any work can, technically, become a work of art, Bullough shows a higher appreciation for the effect art has on the perceiver. In addition, the creation of art is also distanced, or becomes special in Bullough's account. Creation is an essential idea in Bullough's philosophy of psychical distance, as it deeply considers the relationship between the subject and the object. However, distance also has negative implications largely ignored in Bullough's text.

Even though distance does identify a relationship between subject and object, it also identifies an "other". This notion, especially when taken out of the world of art, and considered in a greater-world context, sets up more divisions. In this case, the distanced perception is an entitled perception. Bullough's notion of distance also ignores more abstract works of art. He seems to present an unwillingness to consider

other sensory and more immersive arts in his evaluation of psychical distance. For example, how does this psychological aesthetic theory, psychical distance, affect the art of typography? Bullough's theory only addresses artwork that can be looked at in isolation. The distance view appears, again, to be a privileged view - only certain works of art apply and the observer can only consider distance in specific contexts. Bullough's distance does, however, address the inner-workings of the psychological side of perception, but ignores the great question of contextualization. While Bullough's psychical distance begins to qualify and offer methods to the world of art, the question remains, what *is* the aesthetic consciousness?

works cited

Aesthetics a critical anthology. New York: St. Martin's P, 1989.