Preface

When we look at abstract paintings, drawings, sculptures, and other abstract forms of what is termed fine art,[1] how do we understand these experiences? Perhaps we see a mess, a clutter or a confusion of lines, shapes and textures, and perhaps an array of vivid colour. Providing an answer to the question of just what it is we see when we look at abstract artworks has been a challenge accepted by many authors (see for example, Crowther 2007; Crowther and Wunsche 2012), including myself (Hackett 2013, 2016). In relation to two-dimensional artworks, these authors and I, have attempted to shed light upon what I call *figure–ground mereology*[2] where figure and ground are parts of the whole artwork, are related to this totality and where the parts have structural interrelationships. In this essay, I will offer my contribution to the debate about the perception of abstract art: specifically, art that is both abstract and three dimensional.

In an attempt to establish such an understanding, I will consider how, in the general course of our lives, we perceive the visual field that stretches out before us, and more specifically, the way in which we perceive three-dimensional works of art that are understood to be abstract rather than figurative or directly representational. A central concern within this essay is the relationships that exist between a three-dimensional artwork and its context in situations where context is central to the artworks' perception (be these figurative, concrete representations of reality or non-representational forms of art) within our visual fields. Furthermore, the

[1]Fine art is sometimes called studio art in the US and is usually thought to consist of painting, drawing, sculpture, printmaking, and other forms of predominantly visual art. Within this grouping of art products, fine art is primarily or exclusively associated with viewer appreciating such artworks in terms of their content which is intellectual (a person's mental abilities applied to achieve understanding objectively through reasoning), imaginative (the construction of novel ideas, concepts or images from what we sense but which is not present for the senses) or aesthetic (that which is associated with beauty or the creation of beauty). Furthermore, it is often assumed that to create fine art requires great skill on the part of the artist and knowledge and discernment on the part of the viewer.

[2]Mereological is that which pertains to mereology, where mereology is the study of part to whole relationships.

exploitation by the artist of the relationships in two-dimensional artwork between figure and ground elements forms the basis for the creation of the perceived art image. In three-dimensional works of art, this relationship delimits objects and forms: Within some definitions of art, figure–ground and object–context are the components of an artwork that facilitate the artist's mereological account and convey meaning.

Mereology is a term found in philosophical writing and thinking. Literally, mereology means the study of parts and wholes and their associations. In philosophy, mereology is usually composed of a series of part–whole relationships that are somewhat formally specified through algebraic equations. When thinking about abstract, two- and three-dimensional visual art, what constitutes the perception of this mereological amalgam of object, figure or form, positive and negative space, may become almost duplicitous: Perceptions of abstract forms of artwork are particularly and specifically multi-faced as they embody uncertainty. At the same time, and in contrast to figurative art, non-representative art more clearly exposes the ways in which the three-dimensional art object may be incorporated within, and differentiated from, its context by the artist. Without seeking recourse to the use of figurative elements three-dimensional abstract art attempts to exploit physiological/psychological associations and in doing this uncertainty itself becomes part of the artwork. During the following pages, I will briefly review how we structure our observations of visual objects.[3]

A vast literature exists that explores the nature of how we conceive of the world around us. As vision, forms the major sense through which we assemble our worldview I will spend time looking at a selection of these visual worldviews. In one sense, these worldviews may be considered ontologies. Ontology is the study of being and the properties of being, as these properties are shared across material and non-material entities. Ontology is concerned with the understanding the fundamental categories of existence.[4]

Husserl (1859–1938) advanced a categorial system in his Logical Investigations (1913–21) (Fisette 2003) of a 'pure theory of objects'. In his ontology, Husserl proposed the categories of: object, state of affairs, property, genus, species, unity, plurality, number, relation, connection, series, part, whole, dependence, magnitude, open and closed, set, boundary, manifold, space, time, movement, causality, etc. From this list, it can be seen that Husserl's ontology is an extremely comprehensive account of the more basic elements of life. Husserl was stating an ontological framework, where these categories form an understanding of our being or existence, where this ontology may also be employed to define a manner in which we comprehend the nature of being human.

In any attempt to explain how human beings experience their existence, a subset of ontological categories may be selected in order to form boundaries around and to

[3]What I mean when I use the term art object is a work of fine art that is not a painting, drawing, or print, but is a three-dimensional object or an art event within space.

[4]An ontology is also a model or representation of the basic elements of our experience.

delimit an existential domain. In this essay I will attempt to establish the bounds, and internal sub-divisions of, the experience of three-dimensional abstract fine art. I liken the application and/or functional processes of an ontology to those of a worldview as both delimit our experiences. Ontologies and worldviews define what we consider valid and thus determine the scope of our theorizing and the statements that arise from our speculations. Formal ontology is the systematic understanding of the forms of entities and states of being in the world. As well as ruminating upon ontologies as totalities I will reflect upon the separate parts of the world, as we understand this, and the parts relate to each other and to the whole (ontology) itself.[5]

I have specific reasons for focussing upon the concepts of ontology and mereology. The first of these is that I have used mapping sentences and facet theory in my earlier research. These approaches incorporate an implicit ontological perspective that has helped me to identify the basic units through which we experience of an artwork (an ontological account). Furthermore, the mapping sentence approach can also model the interrelationships between the basic ontological elements of an artwork (a mereological account). In my earlier research I have used facet theory approaches to produce understanding of how we perceive two-dimensional artworks. In the current research, I attempt to extend this understanding by developing a mereological/ontological account of three-dimensional artworks located within the visual field.[6]

Several writers and scholars have exerted an important influence upon the writing in this book. Of these authors, I will especially be considering the writing of art historian and writer Rosalind Krauss,[7] who has written a great deal about the visual field and how both two-dimensional and three-dimensional artworks occupy this space. In particular, she has deliberated over how artists from the modernist milieu have used devices such as figure and ground in their two-dimensional works and how land artists have explored notions of the extended visual field in their three-dimensional creations.[8] In the case of three-dimensional works, Krauss dwells upon concepts of the extended field of the work and offers accounts of three-dimensional works inclusive of the location within which a work is sited. In both two- and three-dimensional cases, Krauss emphasizes the context within which an artwork is situated and the general context that surrounds an art object.

In terms of the two-dimensional images and three-dimensional artworks, Krauss' seminal contribution to understanding the artwork has been the development of a structuralists' account that uses a 'Klein Group Model'. Krauss claims that the

[5]Scholars whose thoughts are important in this part of my essay include but are not limited to: Plato, Aristotle; Ockham; Dun Scotus; Kant and Hegel.

[6]When speaking about the visual field I am defining this to be the area that a person is able to see when looking through a single eye whilst keeping their body, and especially their head, motionless.

[7]For example: Krauss (1977, 1981, 2003).

[8]In simple terms, the extended field is the space or area around a three-dimensional artwork or the larger area that constitutes a work of land art, etc.

Klein group she develops is able to account for the experience of, large-scale non-traditional three-dimensional artwork in terms of the works constituting object (architecture) and context (landscape) relationships. The model she says spatially and contextually locates three-dimensional works. One of the main reasons for my writing this text is in order to allow me to critique Krauss' Klein Group Model, to expiate upon this and to further develop Krauss' structural understanding within my own ontological/mereological framework. In an attempt to evaluate and expand upon the Klein Group Model, in this essay I address a series of questions about the nature of Krauss' theories. For example, when using the structure implied in the Klein Group I ask the questions:

- How has Krauss used her model to facilitate understanding of modernist abstract artwork?
- Does her model provide useful and original insight into the ways in which we perceive abstract art?
- How have other researchers and scholars taken her model forward?

Finally, I ask an extremely important question:

- How can I progress understanding of the process and experience of perceiving abstract art?

As I have already noted, I do not stop at simply commenting on the Klein Group Model but rather I use this as a springboard to impel the further development of my own theorizing upon the perception of art abstraction. To date, I have considered two-dimensional artworks in my writing (Hackett 2013, 2016) but in this essay, I extend my writing into art with a third dimension. Both Krauss's Klein Group and my earlier writing envisage the experience of art as being multifarious events. As this is the case, in much of my research and thinking, I have employed facet theory[9] and have considered how the perception of two-dimensional art can be depicted using a mapping sentence[10] and how further understanding of the characteristics of three-dimensional art can be developed through a partial ordering of these characteristics.[11]

To these ends, I have turned to the work of another philosopher, Paul Crowther, who has written much on phenomenological aspects of art experience and ontology. Reviewing Crowther's work led me to evaluate the eight characteristics of abstract art

[9]I will explore facet theory in considerable detail in this book, at this stage interested readers and guided to Canter (1985) and Hackett (2014) for initial details about facet theory.

[10]Much of my research has been into the use of the mapping sentence as a stand-alone research tool, as a research project management technique and as a therapeutic approach (see Hackett 2014)

[11]Partial Order Scalogram Analysis, and its potential use within a qualitative data setting, are the major research analytic procedure I will use towards the end of this book. The use of Partial Order Scalogram Analysis is dealt with in some depth by Shye (1985) and Shye and Amar (1985), to which the interested reader is guided). Multidimensional Scalogram Analysis (MSA) is a further form of analysis used within facet theory research. However, I will not be using this form of data representation within this essay.

he proposed (Crowther 2007) which are: *Resemblances; Gestural Associations; Revelations; Novel Environments; Neoteric Configuration; Visual Suggestion; Spatial/Structures; Fantasy*. In Hackett (2016) I applied these eight characteristics to promote understanding of experiential aspects of two-dimensional abstract art. In this essay, I extend my research that embodies Crowther's characteristics into the arena of three-dimensional art where I will evaluate iamges of the same land art pieces viewed by Krauss (1979) in her research into the extended visual field.[12] I will therefore be attempting to establish how Krauss' three-dimensional "art-space" can be understood using a mapping sentence mereology and partial order analysis. I will also be asking similar questions and use similar procedures and approaches to consider Crowther's ontology. However, it must be kept in mind that in this book, I will develop this understanding of art-space as it exclusively encompasses three-dimensional works of abstract art.[13]

Having provided a very terse exposition of my essay, in the next section I offer a synopsis to the chapters that follow.

Chapter Synopsis

In this book, I provide a structural understanding for how art is perceived within the space occupied by the artwork: this is a situation and historically located account of how we understand a specific form of contemporary art. In Chapter 1, I introduce readers to the major components of the research that forms the books content. I provide definitions of terms that are ambiguous or which I use in a specific sense. By the end of this chapter, the reader will understand my reasons for writing this book. I will also make clear the questions I am attempting to answer.

In Chapter 2 I introduce the main theoretical background that I draw upon in regards to philosophers and theorists who have written upon the structure of our understandings and perceptions of abstract three-dimensional art: As already mentioned, the two main authors with whom I am concerned are Rosalind Krauss and Paul Crowther. Krauss' Klein Group model is discussed[14] as is Crowther's ontology.

In Chapter 3, I consider the use of a mapping sentence to provide an account for our experiences of non-traditional three-dimensional art. My exposition on this subject includes my using the mapping sentence to Meaningfully depict three-

[12]Consequently I consider Krauss' understanding of how three-dimensional artwork has developed through the twentieth century to encompass earthworks and other forms of large-scale artefacts.

[13]Towards the end of this book I will also evaluate and present similarities between my models of two- and three- dimensional art experiences.

[14]I review how Krauss' accounts of the contents of art related visual experience in her consideration of figure–ground in abstract two-dimensional art leads into her work on the expanded field in site-specific sculptural works (her foray into three-dimensional abstract art). These are reviewed to form the basis for the need for my present research.

dimensional art. I also provide facet analyses of both Rosalind Krauss' and Paul Crowther's theorizing upon three-dimensional art.

Chapter 4 is the longest chapter in this book, in which I present the body of my research findings. The results take the form of a partial ordering mereology that I offer to explain the experience of non-traditional three-dimensional art. The main results are then presented as a partial ordering of Crowther's ontology of eight characteristics, which he has developed to explain the experiential structure of abstract art.

Chapter 5 is the final chapter and in this, I provide a summarized overview of my research findings. I also consider how the insight I have offered regarding the perception and understanding of abstract three-dimensional art is related to earlier models that I have developed of the same psychological components as they relate to two-dimensional abstract art. I also consider the directions in which future research employing qualitative or philosophical facet theory research may proceed.

The shortcomings in the interpretations of the perceptual process by Krauss, Crowther and others, are used to help formulate a more comprehensive philosophical account for the perceptual process. The book uniquely brings together structuralist and post-structuralist accounts for artistic perception and understanding within a conceptual structure from facet theory that is explicated and clarified by the use of a mapping sentence mereology. This book is the most recent in a series of books and articles I have written that have addressed how we perceive and understand abstract fine art using a non-traditional, non-quantitative facet theory approach to research. This book also exists in conjunction with my art practice. The art and written works I have created address the same questions and simply employ different modes of expression to provide answers.

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