Abstract:

Examining Neurological Investigations of Art: A Response to V. S. Ramachandran and Semir Zeki

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Art practice and appreciation are generally considered products of human culture, rather than areas for scientific investigation. Yet, perhaps because art that is quintessentially exquisite speaks so deeply to us, it is difficult to see human culture as a map for one's individual experience with art. No doubt this explains why analyses of art have traditionally been closely tied to aesthetic theories, formal analysis, and philosophical discourse. These kinds of investigations, however, tend to evaluate works of art in and of themselves and offer a stark contrast to the views of many who research and practice art. Ideas, aesthetics, and formal qualities, while easily fit into the scientific quest for universals, often lose sight of the dynamism, complexity, and richness of art. Moreover, as the literature shows, in recent decades art historians and artists have increasingly challenged the legitimacy of the aesthetic/formal agenda. Instead, the field has expanded to include a closer examination of complex social, economic, religious, and political influences. This art discourse, while addressing some of the limitations of the aesthetic/philosophical framework, often diffuses the cognitive contributions that accompany art practice and art appreciation.

Now, with the explosion of brain research on cognition, perception, and sensation it seems a third approach is emerging. Scientists/philosophers/psychologists are beginning to explore the nature of art in ways that include neurobiological and neuropsychological questions. What is exemplary within this is the way researchers of the brain have begun to open a door for all of us to re-think our ideas about art. This paper will examine areas where neurobiological studies have advanced our understanding of art, and the shortcomings embedded within investigations to date. This focus will be on the recent work of Semir Zeki and V. S. Ramachandran.