Journal of Aging Studies 40 (2017) 8–15

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Aging Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jaging

Living autobiographically: Concepts of aging and artistic expression in painting and modern dance

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 22 August 2016
Received in revised form 19 October 2016
Accepted 5 December 2016
Available online 22 December 2016

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the ways in which artists have incorporated or failed to incorporate the aging process of their bodies into their art. Using Russian ballet dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov and the French painter Claude Monet as cases in point, we explore situations in which physical changes brought about by aging compromises artists' ability to engage with their artistic medium. Connecting Monet's oeuvre and Baryshnikov's dance performances to life writing accounts, we draw on John Paul Eakin's concept of "living autobiographically": In this vein, life writing research does not only have to take into account concepts of identity as they emerge from life writing narratives, but it also needs to explore the somatic, corporeal and material dimensions of these narratives.

Artistic expression has been key to the ways in which we experience the changes in our lives, changes which relate not only to processes of social and cultural identification but also to the materiality of our bodies. Experiences of illness and of aging have come to be explored not only through biomedical research, but also and especially via the narratives that have been created about such experiences by patients and relatives. As a critical framework for interdisciplinary discussion, age studies and medical humanities have been key in establishing the relevance of artistic expression for our understanding of the experience of aging, the ways in which our body changes and the challenges which this physical change may pose to the individual.

Artistic expression – whether in writing, painting, dance or performance culture – can depict aging in various forms. The wealth of representations of older characters in movies and TV series – to name just these two representational art forms – has been shown to shape how viewers, both young and old, understand old age and the passage of time (e.g., Oró-Piqueras & Wohlmann, 2015; Robinson, Callister, Magoffin, & Moore, 2007). Moreover, the perception of the aging process as it is mediated in Western popular culture is also a deeply gendered one (Maierhofer, 2003; Woodward, 1999), and it varies for different communities and cultures (Gullette, 2004; Kunow, 2009). The medial depiction of aging and of characters which undergo the aging process thus have a profound impact on the way we deal with and understand processes of aging in our own lives; and representations of aging in artistic and cultural representation have long become inseparable from the experience of aging itself.

At the same time, artists, performers and literary writers have depicted the process of aging not only in fictionalized form, but they have also included autobiographical elements in such depictions. Crucially, such autobiographical features can lead to a change in genre, medium or style, especially if the loss of certain faculties related to the aging process are involved. What this implies is that a given medium or style may not lend itself to the incorporation of autobiographical references to the artist's own aging process to the same extent; some media may be more susceptible to such depiction than others.

The concept of "late style" encompasses some of these aspects. Challenging the notion that artistic creation is often fueled by a young genius who wishes to revolutionize or upend the established aesthetic conventions of (older) predecessors, late style has shifted attention to the innovativeness and quality that the late work of artists, such as Beethoven, Ibsen, Michelangelo, Goya, Monet, Rembrandt and Cézanne, demonstrates (Cohen-Shalev, 1989). The concept of lateness does not only imply a work's lateness in the artist's life course but also factors in "age and aging as elements of artistic production" (Charise, 2012: 7). According to Kathleen Woodward (1993), old age "can be transforming – of thought, of style, of life itself" (94) because the experience of loss can constitute "a force for change" that yields renewal (82). Similarly, Edward Said (2007) defines late style as "a new idiom" that artists develop in their work and thought as they grow into old age (6). Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2012) have criticized late theory, arguing that the concept is too fuzzy, too simplistic in its universalizing of old age and influenced by age scholars' frantic endeavor to establish a counter concept to the decline ideology that is so often equated with the

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2016.12.002
0890-4065/

aging process. According to the Hutcheons' critique, late style or lateness is rather a practice of reading than a characteristic of an artistic oeuvre.

While late style is certainly a practice of reading that is informed by cultural and socio-political discourses, there is also a material dimension to late artistic expression that cannot be overlooked. It is this materiality of the body as well as the biomedical discourses that keep pathologizing the aging body and the artistic maxims of physical perfection (particularly in classical ballet) that complicate a dismissal of the decline ideology. For the Russian virtuoso dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov, whose work we will explore among others in this article, aging did indeed imply loss and decline. Instead of supplementing the decline trajectory with one of success or progress, Baryshnikov's artistic oeuvre – even though it does represent continuing success and a notion of becoming and change – is one that foregrounds the materiality of the dancer's body and its limits: In an experimental modern dance performance, "HeartBeat: mb" (2002) Baryshnikov by virtue of biomedical engineering, danced to the rhythm of his own heartbeat, and the audience could witness the strain which the performance put on the fifty-year-old dancer's art through an on-stage cardiac monitor. Thus, Baryshnikov incorporates the materiality of his aging body into his artistic expression and makes visible how the decrease of physical strength affects his ability to perform, foregrounding his difficulties in living up to the canonical roles of classical ballet as well as to the audience's expectations generated by his previous performances of the same roles in his younger days.

At the same time, what is at stake here is not only the relationship of the experience of aging and its artistic expression, but also the nature of the aging experience itself. As we will elaborate as this article progresses, Baryshnikov responded to age-related changes in his body by deciding to change the genre of his artistic expression, switching from classical dance to modern dance. In so doing, he responded dynamically to the age process, rather than denying it by holding onto a genre in which his younger self had so excelled. Through this dynamic adaptation and incorporation of "aging into art," he testifies to the ability to age authentically, to view the changes in his body not as processes to be suppressed or defied, but as natural phenomena in the very process of living. Thus, he exemplifies what, in the field of behavioral studies, has recently been called "somatic drama" (Keleman, 2013: 3).

To conceptualize Baryshnikov's "authentic aging," we will draw on the ways in which, a century earlier and in similar ways, two French painters – Claude Monet and Edgar Degas – responded to changes in their eyesight by changing the nature of their art – and through this change, came to revolutionize the history of modern painting and sculpturing. Dissimilar as these cases may seem in historical and artistic terms – a virtuoso of classical ballet at the end of the twentieth century and two painters at the turn of the twentieth century –, they have much in common: In these cases, the artist experiences a change in capability, and loses a faculty that has been central to his artistic expression. For the painter, the loss of his ability to see colour contrasts severely affects his creative expression; for the dancer of classical ballet, the decrease of physical strength can affect his ability to perform the canonical roles of classical ballet. At the same time, what is at stake here is not only the relationship of the experience of aging and its artistic expression, but also the nature of the aging experience itself. As we will elaborate as this article progresses, both Baryshnikov and the painters Monet and Degas responded to age-related changes in their bodies by deciding to change the genre and/or the style of their artistic expression. Moreover, even though their art is beyond language and storytelling, these artists negotiate their identities as aging painters and dancers through an attunement to "living autobiographically" (Eakin, 2008), and thus through an attention to the materiality of their embodied identity.

This article brings together approaches from cultural studies, age studies, behavioral psychology and life-writing research to explore the complex ways in which expressions of aging can be incorporated into art. This paper thus looks at artistic production from the nineteenth as well as the twentieth century, exploring the changing – and potentially overlapping – attitudes which artists expressed about the aging processes. In doing so, we approach aging and artistic expression from several disciplinary angles to trace the multiple levels of experiences – autobiographical, artistic, biomedical and physical – by which the artist's bodies and oeuvre were shaped.

The painter's eye-sight: the impact of aging on modern art

If age studies as we employ them here as a critical methodology explore the ways in which individuals are "aged" by culture (Gullette, 2004), then it seems appropriate to look at both dance and painting as such cultural expressions. Yet, it is crucial for our purposes here that age studies investigations can pertain not only to the "representation of age" on stage or in painting, but also the discourse of aging that may inform the cultural production itself. How, in other words, is the process of aging – the aging body of the cultural producer – the art form itself? One of the authors of this paper has previously investigated the relationship between the eye diseases of famous painters such as Claude Monet and Edgar Degas and the resulting changes in artistic expression. It is on this previous study that we are drawing in this article, relating it to the "case" of Mikhail Baryshnikov and his "Heart:beat" performance, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Ocular diseases are common ailments, especially in the later years of life. It has, for example, been estimated that cataracts afflict as much as 25% of people in their 60s (https://nei.nih.gov/eyedata/cataract). This prevalence means that a sizeable number of painters who lived to that age will also have suffered from eye conditions. Unfortunately, up until the 20th century, ocular diseases could often not be detected early and/or accurately diagnosed. As such, in many cases where the artistic style of an artist has changed with age, it is not possible to determine whether and, if so, how his/her visual perception–and hence style–is the result of an altered way of seeing the world or due to an artistic development. There are cases, however, where the eye diseases an artist has suffered from are well documented, including when the ocular problems first manifested themselves, what their symptoms were, and how they affected visual perception. Rarely, there are even cases where the disease was treated, which could result in an improvement of visual perception again. Such documentation can be the medical records of physicians who treated the afflicted artists, but also accounts by family members and friends, as well as the artists themselves. Together they enable us to assess the impact of changes in a painter's vision on his/her work.

The prime example of a painter who developed severe ocular problems and whose visual perception was dramatically changed due to eye disease is the French Impressionist Claude Monet, who developed severe cataracts in the final decades of his life (Dahm, 2002: 37; Lanthony, 2009: 70–78; Trevor-Roper, 1990: 95–96). These eventually grew so strong that Monet was severely visually impaired and—according to his own statements—found it nearly impossible to keep painting. In particular, he was frequently unhappy with the result of his trials and destroyed a number of his later works. Another painter whose eye disease has been documented—albeit not as extensively as for Monet—is Edgar Degas (Dahm, 2002: 37; Lanthony, 2009: 125–143; Trevor-Roper, 1990: 38–40). Without the benefit of medical records as in the case of Claude Monet, he is presumed to have suffered from a form of retinal degeneration that affected his central field of view.

What this implies is that the history of modern painting may in fact be, to some extent, re-read through the biographies and autobiographical documents of some of the most famous protagonists of art history, such as Claude Monet and Edgar Degas. Crucially, art history has focused on these two painters' artistic styles rather than the changes of their material bodies. For example, in his essay "On the Late Style of Life and Art," Rudolf Arnheim (1978) considers Monet's late works in a manner that sidelines the artist's concrete physical impairment and that instead frames his "last landscapes" as "the final outcome of a lifelong