

Meaning and Meaning-Making:
**An exploration into the importance of
creative viewer response for art practice**

A dissertation submitted by

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I hereby declare that the work presented herein is entirely my own


.....
Jörg Jozwiak, November 2013

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Abstract

Empirical research suggests that gallery and museum audiences have a strong propensity to make sense of artworks by understanding what the artist *'means to say'*, or what the *'encoded message'* of a work might be. Conversely, many contemporary artists subscribe to the idea that observers may (or even should) endow their work with their own meaning. In response to this situation, this thesis asks: How can one facilitate a more individual engagement by viewers in the meaning making process?

To approach this task, the concepts of meaning and meaning-making are re-assessed and new definitions suggested that endeavour to relate these terms to discussions of art appreciation. A great deal of attention has been given to processes of meaning-making as a collective, social process. In this work the main emphasis will be placed upon the individual viewer's encounter of a work of art. To develop the concept of meaning-making, arguments from post-structuralist discourses, literature theory, pragmatist aesthetics, and the psychology of art apprehension will be considered. The relation between meaning, verbalisation, and emotion, as well as between the viewer's constructive activity and the artist's intentions are discussed. This work also considers how the construction of meaning is influenced by contextual elements such as biological and social factors, the latter including the influence of the gallery environment. Existing theories, viewer testimonials, artists' statements, and both contemporary and art historical examples are examined in order to determine various approaches that facilitate meaning-making processes.

It will be argued that this interdisciplinary approach successfully brings together diverse and otherwise divided perspectives on the concept of meaning making and the meaning-making process. This research is ultimately aimed at developing a better understanding of the artist-audience relationship. It is anticipated this will proffer a resource for art educators and for other visual artists.

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Meaning is—

- | | | | | |
|---|---|--|---|---|
| A | { | I An Intrinsic property. | { | (c) That which a sign is Interpreted as being of. |
| | | II A unique unanalysable Relation to other things. | | (d) What anything Suggests. |
| | | III The other words annexed to a word in the Dictionary. | | <i>In the case of Symbols.</i> |
| | | IV The Connotation of a word. | | That to which the User of a Symbol actually refers. |
| | | V An Essence. | | C |
| | | VI An activity Projected into an object. | | XIV That to which the user of a symbol Ought to be referring |
| | | VII (a) An event Intended. | | XV That to which the user of a symbol Believes himself to be referring. |
| | | (b) A Volition. | | XVI That to which the Interpreter of a symbol |
| B | { | VIII The Place of anything in a system. | | (a) Refers. |
| | | IX The Practical Consequences of a thing in our future experience. | | (b) Believes himself to be referring. |
| | | X The Theoretical consequences involved in or implied by a statement. | | (c) Believes the User to be referring |
| | | XI Emotion aroused by anything. | | |
| | | XII That which is Actually related to a sign by a chosen relation. | | |
| | | XIII (a) The Mnemic effects of a stimulus. Associations acquired. | | |
| C | { | (b) Some other occurrence to which the mnemic effects of any occurrence are Appropriate. | | |

Charles K. Ogden and Ivor A. Richards' "representative list of the main definitions which reputable students of Meaning have favoured". From 'The Meaning of Meaning' by C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

When you think about art, you have to think about life. If art doesn't sensitize us to something in the world, clarify our perceptions, make us aware of the decisions we have made, it's entertainment.

Linda Weintraub, 1997¹

1.1 Motivation

1.1.1 Personal Motivation

In January 2003 I built a snowman outside the University of Applied Sciences in Berlin (Fig. 1). The snowman was warehoused in a freezer with a glass door and exhibited in the foyer of the building for 365 days. Solar panels on a roof visible from the foyer provided the energy



Fig. 1: Jörg Jozwiak, Yesterday's Snow, 2003/2004, installation at the University of Applied Sciences, Berlin.

Photo: Jörg Jozwiak

necessary to power the cooling system 24 hours a day. Occasionally when I visited my work, I listened to some of the comments made by passers-by. One lady felt reminded of people's urge to have everything available at any time: *"like strawberries in December"*, she remarked, *"we need snowmen in July now"*.² Others made comments about alternative energies or global warming, and one of the university technicians, having observed the snowman's gradually changing shape, was most interested in the air's movement and its effects inside the chilled container. It may have been its irony, absurdity, or location perhaps, but something about this installation inspired very diverse reflections.

¹ In: Wallach (1997, para.28).

² Observed in March 2003.

In museums and galleries I have frequently observed how viewers try to make sense of artworks by trying to understand what the artist *'means to say'* or what the *'encoded message'* of a work might be. Conversely, most artists I know subscribe to the idea that observers may (or even should) endow artworks with new, individual meaning. Also, as I can say from own experience, artists are often not clear on what exactly they want to *'say'*, and if they are – why would they hide it in a medium that demands so much work from the viewer? Thus, the viewer's struggle to reveal meaning or hidden messages is often at odds with the artist's intentions.

I cannot say for certain that viewers of the snowman installation were not trying to interpret the ideas and intents of its maker; what is important about this work is that it raised the following question:

What, if any, are the means and strategies, both artistic and contextual, that can be used to promote the viewer's personal engagement with an artwork, rather than leaving her/him to search for hidden meaning?

This question reflects both the motivation and the methodological challenges of this research project. For artists it is not uncommon to change sides and become their own audience.³ When I take a step back to look at my own work during its production, wondering whether to add or remove some detail, I reflect on how the work will be received. I consider decisions previously taken in comparable situations, my education as an artist, previous feedback from others, things I have read or seen. To ask oneself what makes a work of art a *'good'* one inevitably means considering how it will be received. It is an illusion that an exhibiting artist can create a work without anticipating its reception.⁴ I think it is important to gain a better understanding of the patterns that guide such decisions, and as an artist who encourages the viewers' contribution to his works' meaning, I would like to know more about what inspires and what hinders that process. Given my interest in human experience and learning I

³ Painter Rebecca Fortnum, for example, said explicitly: *"I am the maker but I am also the first spectator"* (Whiteley 1999, p.88).

⁴ In this vein, psychologists Arthur P. Shimamura and Stephen E. Palmer argued that works of visual art are *"artifacts intentionally designed to direct attention to the features responsible for their artistically salient effects. The formal structure of an artwork can thereby be understood as the sum total and compositional choices directed towards the production of these effects"* (Shimamura & Palmer 2012, p.56).

wanted to pursue this question further, and thus it has become both the practical and theoretical motivation behind my PhD research.

1.1.2 Academic Motivation

Marcel Duchamp made the following, often-cited claim:

The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. (Duchamp 1957, p.29)

Many contemporary artists call firmly for such a contribution. When visitors enter a Tony Oursler installation today they are often confronted with complaining, slurring, or soliloquising figures – characters that the artist projects on sculptures and that cast the viewer into the role of an interlocutor or witness of their destiny (Figs. 44, 50, 52). These characters are designed to evoke inescapable feelings of empathy and other emotional states. The artist declared:

This open conversational structure ... has been a model for me: a model of the relationship between the viewer and the work of art. I have always fantasized about a dialogue that invites a creative engagement on the part of the viewer. (Oursler & Janus 2000, p.78)

Similar strategies are also found in more static works, such as those of Ceil Floyer. Here the audience faces a ‘suggestion box’ with a ‘Closed’ sign attached, or an Apple Mac waste bin icon projected on the gallery wall (Fig. 2), which thus becomes an empty screen for the viewer’s projections. Floyer’s gallery asserts that her work “forces the viewer to renegotiate his perception of the world” and explores “an imaginative construction of meaning” (Lisson Gallery 2013, para.1). This question of art’s role as a language involved in the generation of meaning has also been at the forefront of Joseph Kosuth’s work. In a 2009 piece, neon letters plainly and self-referentially ask the viewer: ‘What does this mean?’ (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2: Ceal Floyer, *Trash*, 2005, data projector, gallery wall, dimensions variable [the 'suggestions box' (*Untitled*, 2008) visible in the background].

Exhibition shown: *Auto Focus*, Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami (2010). Courtesy of 303 Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Lisson Gallery, London. Photo: Steven Brooke / Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami (©)

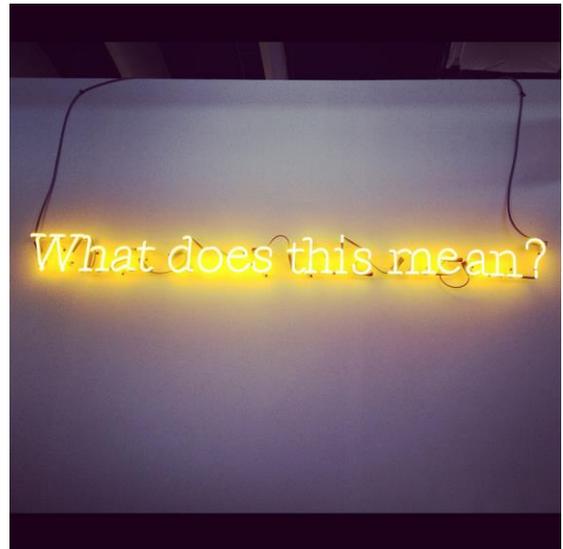


Fig. 3: Joseph Kosuth, *What (does this mean?)*, 2009, yellow neon mounted directly to the wall, 180 x 14 cm.

Exhibition shown: *The Armory Show*, New York (2012). Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Willy Somma (©). Licensed by Bildrecht, Vienna, 2013 (©)

Whilst these works make it comparatively easy for visitors to keep some contemplative distance, Tino Sehgal forces his audience into a position of reflection by employing live actors who approach 'viewers' with personal or philosophical questions. Asked in an interview what the point of this strategy is, Sehgal confronted the reporter: "You tell me! ... The artist proposes, the reception decides" (Sehgal & Rattansi 2010, 2:09min).

It is common for these artists – most of whose examples I will come back to – to follow Duchamp's model of placing the burden of meaning-making on the viewer. This is now an accepted method in contemporary art practice. However, the viability of the concepts of *meaning* and *meaning-making* also evokes scepticism. Cultural critic Mark Cousins has even claimed that: "*The purpose of art is to destroy meaning*", seeing the concept closely related to 'commands' that ask for 'obedience' (Cousins 2012, 1:16min). Such critiques often presume meaning to be a widely accepted but questionable attribute of things, situations, or conditions that has been established by some authority ("*the existing order of signification*"; Cousins 2012, 44:44min). From a post-structuralist perspective, meaning is something that is pre-configured by a whole set of socio-political and historical frameworks and contexts. In this vein, critics might argue that subjects

are only able to make meaning that is conditioned by their being *subject to* certain discourses and power-relations pertaining to cultural norms, social status, education, exposure to visual and commercial culture as well as language constraints. In the context of art in particular, this conditioning also involves the mechanisms of selection, presentation, and modes of discussion used by various institutions of art.

The position advanced in this thesis acknowledges that the production of individual meaning has its limitations, and necessarily addresses a postmodern critique of meaning. However, the view adopted here endorses a more pragmatic approach to the relationships between artist, artwork and art viewer. The viewer is regarded not as a 'victim' of social determinants, but as an identity in flux born out of the confluence of biological and social influences. We know that people differ in terms of their values, inclinations, knowledge, etc., thus different people endow artworks with different meanings. In pragmatist, as in post-structuralist theories of meaning, the concept does not lay claim to objective certainties, rather it implies a body of personal, potential, and provisional beliefs that permits individuals to better cope with their environment.

Philosopher Arnold Berleant observed that in the recent history of the arts, *"artists have shaped works in every medium in which the active participation of the appreciator in completing the artistic process is essential to the aesthetic effect"* (Berleant 1991, p.25/26). In subsequent years, *'participation'* became a new buzz word in art discourses alongside curator Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of *'relational aesthetics'* through which he explores, *"the productive existence of the viewer of art, the space of participation that art can offer"* (Bourriaud & Simpson 2001, p.48).⁵ Philosopher Jacques Rancière, who has made equally influential contributions to art theory, has hinted at the special potential of film, video and installation art to rework *"the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects"* as they will potentially open up *"new passages for political subjectivation"* (Rancière 2010a, p.134). Conferences such as the annual *'Making Sense Colloquium'* are held to *"provoke and install the aesthetic encounter and an art practice as media to help us understand and make sense of the world"* (Collins & Rush 2011, p.1).

⁵ For example: Lacy (1994), Bourriaud (Bourriaud 2002 [1998]), Kwon (2004), Kester (2004; 2011a), Bishop (2004; 2006a; 2012), James (2005).

The political objective of art has, as these and other observers of contemporary practice suggest, shifted towards inspiring the engagement of the audience. Thus, in recent years, the Duchampian perspective has become more poignant. Adding to the creative act is less defined by *'deciphering'* than by *'interpreting'* though, whereas interpretation allows, in the vein of Umberto Eco's concept of the Open Work, an artwork to be charged "*with all the personal reactions that might be compatible with the intentions of the author*" (Eco 1989 [1962], p.104). Although there has been broad agreement between artists and art theorists regarding the viewer's role as a participant in the *'creative act'*, there is a body of empirical and theoretical research on audience behaviour to suggest that viewers are reluctant to take on the burden of responsibility.⁶ A study involving interpretative approaches of teachers at London's Tate Modern, for example, revealed that:

The biggest stumbling block in reading artworks was having confidence in the concept of multiple interpretations. ... [T]he group exhibited an enthusiasm to identify a single authoritative voice to deliver what was considered the definitive meaning of a work. Most often this 'true' voice was taken to be the artist's intention. If this strategy failed, another authoritative voice was substituted, most commonly that of the art historian. (Charman & Ross 2006, p.32)

As long as this approach to art is passed on to new generations, it is not surprising that the majority of viewers, as audience researcher Anne-Marie Émond has observed, "*concentrate on the accessibility of the work's symbolic message*" (Émond 2008, p.55).

Studies conducted over a wide range of audiences – from novices to museum professionals – suggest that it is often the major motivation for visitors of art exhibitions to prove to themselves that they are competent to make sense

⁶ See: Burgbacher-Krupka (1979), Housen (1983), Parsons (1987), Csíkszentmihályi and Robinson (1990), Wetzl-Fairchild (1991; 1997), Hooper-Greenhill et al. (2001), Leder et al. (2004), Charman and Ross (2006), Van Moer (2007; 2010) Rowold (2008), Émond (2002; 2006a; 2010), Pelowski & Akiba (2011), Kirchberg & Tröndle (2012); for a philosophical account, see: Pignocchi (2012); for a philosophical taxonomy, see: Inns (2001); for a pedagogical account and critique, see: Becker (1993); for an historical explanation of the increasing propensity of critics and art viewers in general to reveal hidden messages, see: Elkins (1999).

of certain artworks, or to improve their general ability to ‘understand’ art.⁷ This runs counter not only to the idea of the viewer as active meaning-maker, but also to the postmodern view that art should promote doubt in meaning production (for example Lyotard 1991; Deleuze & Guattari 1994).

Some have argued that art tends to be ahead of its contemporary audience (Gopnik 2012). This assessment becomes obsolete with respect to the agendas of participatory art forms, especially when aiming to be “*ways of living and models of action within the existing real*” (Bourriaud 2002 [1998], p.13).⁸ Viewer participation has become a key demand. Artists and curators promote it, while art theorists discuss and assess participation’s multifarious facets and ethical perspectives as a contemporary art trend. Only museum visitors seem to be hesitant to participate.⁹ Thus, after developing a “*model of art perception, evaluation and emotion in transformative aesthetic experience*”, psychologists Matthew Pelowski and Fuminori Akiba proposed that a fruitful question for future research may be to determine what environmental and psychological combinations facilitate viewers’ moving beyond the common alternative between the “*assimilation*” or “*rejection*” of artworks (Pelowski & Akiba 2011, p.95). A related question for further investigation has been suggested by art historian James Elkins as he asked: “*[W]hat kinds of pictures are most likely to provoke the generative fear or unease that sets our elaborate reactions in motion?*” (Elkins 1999, p.288). Building on both psychological and art historical threads this thesis addresses these questions from an artist’s perspective.

⁷ For example: Halcour (2002), Leder et al. (2004), Émond (2006b), Silvia (2005a). Anthropologist Shirley Heath argued that for some viewers the desire to improve art-related competence is linked to an “*awareness of their role in the future replication or replaying of the current moment, and of the instructional, mentoring, or modelling function they will perform for others*” (Heath 2006, p.144). For analyses of how classification/interpretation provides self-rewarding intellectual experiences, see: Gordon & Holyoak (1983), Zeki (1999).

⁸ In this vein, artist and philosopher Simon O’Sullivan observed that “*art does not so much offer up a set of knowledges as set up the conditions, we might say the contours, for future knowledges still to come. It is in this sense also that art involves the posing of new questions and as such will always make demands on any already existing audience*” (O’Sullivan 2006, p.56).

⁹ For an empirical assessment of discrepancies between artists’ and non-artists’ approaches to art, see: Bezruczko & Schroeder (1994).

1.2 The Research Question, Aims and Justification

This study revolves around the following central research question:

How can contemporary artists influence the conditions necessary in order to make it more likely that viewers actively participate in the meaning-making of artworks?¹⁰

The *first* aim of this thesis is to investigate, define, and develop the concept of meaning-making. In discussions surrounding participatory and relational art much attention has been paid to meaning-making as a collaborative practice.¹¹ Yet any investigation into the meaning of an object or situation must begin with the individual perceiving or experiencing it. Related analyses of meaning-making that takes place in the one-to-one encounter of the viewer with the work remain comparatively rare in art theoretical debates. A better understanding of meaning-making at this personal level may inform further studies of how meaning is constructed in intersubjective relations or in larger groups of people. Closing this gap will help to better understand and evaluate not only work that is geared towards individual reception, but also art made for a collective production of meaning. I propose that an awareness of factors that promote such meaning-making can be advantageous not only for theorists but also for practitioners. Thus, the *second* aim of this thesis is to expose strategies that artists and art students may explore and apply to their own practice.

The fact that the discrepancy between the interests of artists and viewers has received so little attention in the *art world*¹² is perhaps linked to a widespread disdain of empirical research in this area. In 2000, philosopher Thomas Leddy observed that: “*There are two academic disciplines that study aesthetics: one philosophical and the other psychological. The two are only vaguely aware of each other*” (Leddy 2000, p.118). Reservations still persist but some attempts have been made to bring these different approaches closer

¹⁰ To ask a structurally similar question – “*What properties of art works make them likely to function as vehicles of aesthetic experience?*” – was suggested by psychologists Lloyd E. Sandelands and Georgette C. Buckner (1989, p.111). Avoiding the contentious notion of ‘*aesthetic experiences*’ I am focusing here on aspects of meaning-making only (see: 1.3.3).

¹¹ Related discussions concern, for example, how works acquire meaning by being discussed, or by the interaction between the artist and viewers (for references, see note 5). An extreme version of this view is art historian Grant Kester’s claim that in fact the initiated communication alone constitutes the actual work of art (Kester 2004; 2011).

¹² The term ‘*art world*’ as it is used here implies a group of people including artists, curators, critics, academics, and other art theorists, respectively people who professionally produce, theorise or exhibit contemporary art (Danto 1964; Becker 1984; Dickie 1997).

together.¹³ The *third* aim of this thesis is to add to this relatively young debate and explore how existing research in various disciplines can help to better understand the artist-audience relationship.

A broad and increasing interest in meaning-making and the artist-audience relationship is evidenced in many activities already undertaken in contemporary art institutions. It has been acknowledged that although artworks can and do appeal to meaning-making, they often embody a “*discursive code*” that is not visible to the viewer, and therefore ...

... needs to be made apparent in the art museum ... if a genuine experience of the art, as distinct from an affirmation of what is known already, is to be offered.
(Deeth 2012, p.11,12; also Van Moer 2010)

Recent initiatives to address this include on-topic exhibitions,¹⁴ new curatorial strategies such as the juxtaposition of contemporary and classical art (Fig. 4), or the presentation of scientific experiments as part of the 2012 Documenta and non-art artefacts at the 2013 Venice Biennial. Other curatorial initiatives include new formats of guided tours, workshops in museums, and participatory online curation.¹⁵



Fig. 4: Exhibition view *Riotous Baroque: From Cattelan to Zurbarán: Tributes to precarious vitality*. Kunsthaus Zürich, 2012.

Courtesy of Kunsthaus Zürich. Photo: Bodmer/Mancia, Studio fbm (©)

Despite activities in fields that contextualise contemporary art, it might seem suspicious if an *artist* asks what theoretical knowledge *artists* might employ to

¹³ For integrative approaches, see: Stokes (2009), Schellekens and Goldie (2011), Shimamura and Palmer (2012), Roald and Lang (2013), Bulloet & Reber (2013).

¹⁴ For example: The 2003 Venice Biennial with its motto ‘*Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer*’, ‘*Without You I’m Nothing: Art and Its Audience*’ (Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, 2010/11), ‘*Uncertain Spectator*’ (Experimental Media and Performing Arts Centre, New York, 2010/11); ‘*The Death of the Audience*’ (Secession, Vienna, 2009), ‘*The World as a Stage*’ (Tate Modern, London 2007/08) and ‘*One-on-one*’ (Kunstwerke, Berlin 2013).

¹⁵ See: Carter-Birken (2008), Becker (1993), McManus (1989), Silverman (1995), Falk and Dierking (2000), Leinhardt *et al.* (2002), Hooper-Greenhill (1999), Ravelli (2006), Hubard (2007), Cann (2012), Malm *et al.* (2013).

improve the relationship with the audience. This may sound like looking for rules or strategies within a traditionally autonomous domain and to question an accepted division of responsibility: *'The artist proposes, the reception decides'* ... and the institution facilitates. The following sections address these uncertainties.

1.2.1 A Methodology for Artists?

Artists rarely work in isolation from theory. Those aspects of theory that are reflected in art practice are necessarily shaped by several conditions such as the historical, cultural and ideological choices of both 'providers' of art-related knowledge (art schools, tutors, critics, philosophers, audiences) as well as its 'users' (artists). Guidelines reach from clearly defined standards (like the golden ratio or the effect of complementary colours) to highly relative norms (such as what defines kitsch or the feasibility of engaging previously explored ideas). 'Rules' are rarely precisely formulated. Sociologist Howard Becker argued that artists, when *'editing'* their work, *"respond as they imagine others might respond, and construct those imaginings from their repeated experiences of hearing people apply ... undefinable terms to concrete works in concrete situations"* (Becker 1984, p.200). Architect and art school tutor Pentti Routio elaborated on this issue:

The reason is that the rule is often quite complicated, it can include innumerable exceptions, the artist master who knows the rule is unwilling or unable to write it down, and a researcher that comes from outside does not fully understand the matter. Instead, the normative theory for arts operates mostly with exemplars, i.e. important earlier works of art, as commented from [a] contemporary point of view by experts. (Routio 2007, para.21)

The approach taken by this research is in line with the views of Becker and Routio. Examples from historical and contemporary art show how artists always take the audience into account. It will be shown that research findings in psychology and other scientific fields regarding the ways people respond to their environment in general, and to works of art in particular, can be useful for gaining a better understanding of how one's own work is likely to be experienced. This does not prescribe that artists *should* apply them in their

practice. From an educational perspective, it is not suggested that reception-related knowledge can or should be condensed into a set of rules that amount to theoretical blueprints for art school students. Rather such knowledge is to be treated as a background against which artists can assess their own work and that can also operate tacitly. Theoretical foundations have always been indispensable. For instance, Tino Sehgal builds on his studies in economy and dance (Higgins 2012, para.10), and Tony Oursler studied theories of multiple personality disorder to inform his work (Oursler & Janus 2000). A theory of meaning and meaning-making is nothing more, but certainly nothing less either than a resource for the inclined practitioner or theorist.

1.2.2 The Propriety of Psychology in Art Theory

To develop and substantiate its claims, this thesis draws on findings from psychology and empirical audience research. When artists turn to theory, and scientific theory in particular, they do not usually focus on research concerned with the apprehension of art itself.¹⁶ Many of the sources cited in this thesis are similarly not originally concerned with art. However, it might seem only natural that artists have an interest in theories that illuminate how their work tends to be apprehended. Psychologist Vladimir J. Konečni argued in this vein:

To the extent that the psychology of art ... is in part concerned with perceptual, cognitive, and emotional effects of works of art on appreciators, and that it has the requisite methodological and experimental tools, it would seem that its practitioners could provide an important service to the artists by informing them of the extent to which the intended message is 'getting through' to the audience. (Konečni 1984, p.71)¹⁷

In principal, there is agreement between Konečni's argument and the objectives advanced here. Thus, related research is also drawn on. The final part of the quote indicates however, what many artists and philosophically minded art theorists will justifiably find problematic. Psychology's assumptions of what artists are interested in or what art is essentially about is often mistaken from the start. Here, it is the notion of the *'intended message'* that is questionable. Generally speaking, it is striking how many studies still focus on notions of

¹⁶ For discussions and overviews, see: Ede (2005), Wilson (2010).

¹⁷ Re-affirmed by Konečni (2012, p.287).

'*beauty*' and '*aesthetic pleasure*' (terms with little currency among contemporary artists) and are usually limited to the medium of painting (Hagdtvedt et al. 2008; Lindell & Mueller 2011). Such investigations appear out of touch with the majority of recent art practice and theory, at least if measured by the kind of art that museums of contemporary art or international biennales present today.

Scepticism is also evident with regard to audience research conducted in museums and galleries. These studies are often bound to institutional interests, such as "*measuring the economic and social impact of the arts*" (Reeves 2002). A bias of this kind can be problematic if it becomes a value measure that decides, for instance, about the allocation of arts funding (Bishop 2006b). Another critique launched against the utility of the scientific assessment of responses to art is the opinion that art apprehension is too subtle, subjective or transcendental for a scientific (reductionist/empirical) assessment.¹⁸ Generally speaking, scientific research into art apprehension pursues its own, not necessarily objectionable but ultimately non-artistic aims. These include, for example, insights into ...

... the functions of aesthetic practices and judgments for the development of cognitive and affective capabilities as well as for the subjective well-being, self-concepts and 'self-fashioning' of individuals, for social communication, and for economic purposes. (Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics 2013, para.2)¹⁹

Such objectives have generated a climate of suspicion for artists and art theorists towards scientific research into art apprehension. It is important to stress, however, that the empirical study of art and art audiences is not identical with the study of aesthetic preference, value, taste or the optimal aesthetic experience. Psychological theory and audience research are cited here to support the claim that there is a discrepancy between the views of artists and the actual responses of viewers. This is relevant because it *raises a question*. An investigation of factors that make it more likely for viewers to actively participate in the meaning-making of artworks, presupposes knowledge of viewers' interpretative practices. Regardless of the original research motivation,

¹⁸ See: Munro (1956), Molnar (1974), Carey (2005), Belfiore & Bennett (2008), Gopnik (2012).

¹⁹ Critic Blake Gopnik (2012, p.137) illustrated: "*To discover for instance, that a brain injury or illness increases certain people's representational skills tells you very little about their potential role in the art of the 21st century*" (Gopnik 2012, p.137).

findings from empirical studies in this area are thus an important resource; this thesis aims to bring together outwardly unconnected theories and show how they can complement each other.

1.3 Research Premises

1.3.1 The Viewer

With regard to possible cultural differences concerning the concept of meaning-making, this thesis focuses on the production and reception of art within western cultures only.²⁰ Within this geographic limit, meaning-making as a mode of response is not seen as exclusive to trained viewers such as other artists or critics. Whilst it is understood that familiarity with art theory and contemporary practice adds additional layers to the viewer's experience with artworks, the main skill required is not specialised knowledge. It is anticipated that the viewer will approach the artwork with curiosity and openness to new experiences.²¹ According to philosopher James O. Young, these viewers may be described as a "*broad educated audience*", that is a group of people who "*experience an artwork in whatever way makes it possible for them to benefit from its aesthetic value*", where "*aesthetic value*" includes reflection and "*understanding*" (Young 2010, p.30). Expert viewers are not excluded however. It is acknowledged that experts form an important part of the art audience, and their expertise does not eliminate their need for cues (given by artist or curator) in order to make meaning that corresponds with the ideas of the artist.

The approach taken in this thesis does not assume that any work can or should motivate all art viewers. It is understood that every viewer brings with her/him individual experiences and interests that are beyond the artist's influence. However, artists have employed many techniques in order to gain some influence over subjective factors. Research suggests that there are some common fundamental mechanisms at work in the process of experiencing art, and that the attitude of viewers does not depend on subjective dispositions alone.²² A creative, exploratory attitude can be heightened by objective factors

²⁰ Any application or relevance that this thesis may have outside of western culture will thus be fortuitous.

²¹ For a discussion, see: McCrae & Costa (1997).

²² For references, see: chapter three, note 43.

such as the kind of stimulus presented, the amount and type of additional information provided, and the wider exhibition context. This investigation focuses on information that, when applied, will *facilitate* meaning-making in the sense that a creative, exploratory attitude in viewers is made *more likely*.

1.3.2 The Artwork

Viewer participation in meaning-making does not carry equal weight across all art forms or genres, therefore it is necessary to specify the fields of contemporary art most pertinent to this investigation. The main focus lies in practices that assume, first and foremost, individual apprehension. The reasons for this choice are twofold. First, the modalities of reception of collaborative practices, which often take place in social settings outside the museum or gallery (Lacy 1994; Kester 2004; 2011), differ significantly from those inside these institutions and have, to my knowledge, not been covered by audience research. The application of gallery or museum-related studies to other environments would not be tenable. Second, notions of collective meaning-making – as opposed to individual meaning-making – have already been the subject of extensive philosophical debate.²³ Taken together, they have been theorised insufficiently on empirical grounds and abundantly in philosophical contexts. This circumstance encourages a focus on individual art apprehension. Furthermore, it can be noted with art historian and critic Claire Bishop that *“individual analysis always takes place against the backdrop of society’s norms and pressures”* and that a renouncement of the gallery – as a place promoting such reflection – would therefore be misconceived (Bishop 2012, p.39).

Bishop distinguished between *“participatory art”* suggesting the involvement of many people and *“interactivity”* implying a one-to-one relationship between viewer and work (Bishop 2012, p.1). Although such a distinction is useful, the term *‘interactivity’* is misleading in that it is most often perceived or assumed to refer to physical engagement with digital technology such as Virtual Reality installations (Nolan 2009). A more appropriate description of the art with which this thesis is concerned is suggested by artist Thomas Hirschhorn whom Bishop cited elsewhere:

²³ Collective meaning-making emphasises learning about the views and values of other people through discussions of the work with other members of the audience, participants, or the artist. For references, see note 5.

I do not want to do an interactive work. I want to do an active work. To me, the most important activity that an artwork can provoke is the activity of thinking. Andy Warhol's Big Electric Chair (1967) makes me think, but it is a painting on a museum wall. An active work requires that I first give of myself. (Bishop 2004, p.62)

This thesis focuses on this type of 'active', individually experienced artwork.

In most disciplines, meaning-making is bound up with notions of *reflection*. This is somewhat contentious when applied to art apprehension since among artists, like among viewers, there are differences regarding the weight given to intellectual apprehension. This thesis acknowledges that art can be physically, emotionally, visually or otherwise sensually experienced without demanding reflection, but it agrees that meaning-making (as *one* important way of apprehending art) is indeed closely related to intellectual processing. Therefore, the *types* or *genres* of contemporary art discussed here are those that demand intellectual efforts and this is especially characteristic for practices addressing social, environmental, and/or cultural issues. A closely related objective of many contemporary artists is to direct viewers' attention back to themselves (as viewers) in order to foster greater self-awareness. Exposing viewers to mirrors, cameras or recordings of their own voice or image are some of the methods employed to achieve this (Rothbaum et al. 1982); other strategies will be discussed in the following chapters. Art theorist Lawrence Rinder and linguist George Lakoff suggested the term "*consciousness art*" as a category for works created with the aim of alerting the viewer to the "*sensations and mechanisms of consciousness itself*" allowing them to "*experience firsthand conscious sensation*" (Rinder & Lakoff 1999, p.26).²⁴ Similarly, artist Olafur Eliasson declared that in his works ...

... visitors may experience themselves experiencing the artwork. The audience should, in other words, be encouraged to see themselves both from a third-person perspective, that is, from the outside, and from a first-person perspective. (Eliasson 2006, p.82)

For Rinder and Lakoff as well as Eliasson, the "*visceral connection of the viewer's experience in the here and now*" is most crucial (Rinder & Lakoff 1999, p.33). Audience researchers Andrea Weltzl-Fairchild and Andrea Gumpert

²⁴ In a related vein, philosopher Alva Noë argued that some art "*enables us to catch ourselves in the act of perceiving and can allow us thus to catch hold of the fact that experience is not a passive interior state, but a mode of active engagement with the world*" (Noë 2000, p.128).

described a more reflective mode of self-consciousness in art apprehension. Following their own empirical investigations they argued that:

[I]t is quite possible for visitors ... to become aware of their ideas, preferences and learning. For some visitors there is a sense of discovering themselves as they speak their thoughts while looking at works of art; while for others of a more reflective cast of mind, there is a confirmation of who they are and how they function. (Wetzl-Fairchild & Gumpert 2006, p.124)

As a crucial self-reflective element (which I believe is under-represented in Rinder and Lakoff's notion of 'consciousness art'), I will refer to this type of art as *art that refers the viewer back to her/himself (as viewer)*.

In summary, the *types* or *genres* of contemporary art to which this thesis is most pertinent will:

- a) assume a 'one-to-one relationship' of meaning-making, mostly in the context of an art gallery or museum,
- b) address political, social, environmental, or cultural issues, and/or
- c) refer the viewer back to her/himself (as viewer).

1.3.3 The role of 'Aesthetics'

Many of the positions drawn on in this thesis, both philosophical and psychological, identify themselves as belonging to discourses on 'aesthetics'. The common equation of art apprehension with aesthetic apprehension is problematic because it treats the concept of aesthetics as capable of being charged with ever new content, whilst ignoring its roots in the philosophical study of beauty, feeling, and sensation. Philosopher Peter Osborne argued that the "inability to grasp contemporary art philosophically in its contemporaneity" is partially owed to the "continuing conflation of 'art' and 'aesthetic'" (Osborne 2013, p.8). Art critic Blake Gopnik agrees:

If nothing else, the fact that thousands upon thousands of art professionals now study and enjoy art without ever thinking or talking about 'aesthetics' or 'beauty' means the concepts are not necessary, and certainly not sufficient, to what constitutes an art object or its understanding. (Gopnik 2012, p.134)²⁵

²⁵ For related arguments, see: Blinkley (1977), Eldridge (2003, p.60), Tavin (2007), Ziff (2010 [1984]), Gopnik (2012), Bergeron & Mclver Lopes (2012).

In order to avoid confusion regarding the definition of aesthetics, this thesis is not intended to contribute to discussions of the aesthetic experience, at least not in so far as it is understood as a transcendental phenomenon or an attitude of *'disinterest'*²⁶. Instead, it relies on the fact that we know that much contemporary art *is*, and is *intended to be*, reflected on by viewers – be that considered *aesthetic* apprehension or not. If the term aesthetics is used in the context of other authors' writings it should be understood in the very broad sense suggested by philosopher George Dickie as *"the language and concepts which are used to describe and evaluate works of art"* (Dickie 1962, p.289).

1.4 Terms and Definitions

1.4.1 Meaning-Making (A Preliminary Definition)

The concept of meaning is understood differently across a wide range of disciplines including linguistics, philosophy, semiotics and psychology, and there is no agreement among schools and individual thinkers within each discipline on how it is to be defined.²⁷ Psychologist Dmitry A. Leontiev concluded: *"Until now, meaning remains an insightful metaphor rather than a scientific concept"* (Leontiev 2005, p.1). An investigation into the notion of meaning in the context of art apprehension will be specific to the visual arts, considering that in other contexts one might wonder what cloud formations *mean* for the weather to come, what is the *meaning* of ancient hieroglyphs or what a sudden rise in blood pressure *means* for a patient. For the purposes of this investigation, a preliminary definition of meaning-making is useful. Art theorist and art education scholar Michael J. Parsons summarised the premise of theories that focus on *"our response to artworks as interpretation, as the construction of meanings rather than as the perception of qualities"* as follows:²⁸

²⁶ The notion of *'disinterest'* goes back to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and assumes an attitude that is free from anything of practical use, moral judgment, economic worth, or other idiosyncratic interests. In this view, the *'beautiful object'* is to be appreciated *'for its own sake'* and devoid of any purpose in mind. For an overview, see: Wenzel (2008, chap.1).

²⁷ In their seminal *'The Meaning of Meaning'*, linguist Charles K. Ogden and literary critic Ivor A. Richards (1960 [1923]) compiled 16 different definitions (see their summary reproduced at the onset of this thesis). For a condensed overview of *"approaches to the study of meaning"*, see: Cruse (2010, pp.14–15).

²⁸ According to Parsons, these theories *"treat the interpretation of visual works of art in much the same way theorists have treated literary and other kinds of texts, appealing variously to hermeneutic, reader-response, reception, and intertextualist theories"* (Parsons 2002, p.30).

The meaning of the work is seen as constructed by the interaction of the viewer with the work. Meaning therefore depends in part on the particular viewer and/or the culture of the viewer. Hence it is not universal, the same for every viewer.

(Parsons 2002, p.30)

Although the sharp distinction between interpretation and sensing perceptual qualities will be disputed (as has Parsons), this definition best reflects the term meaning as it is applied throughout this thesis. The process of *constructing*, the *making* of meaning, is understood as a mental activity of the individual viewer.

Musical semiologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez provided a definition:

An object of any kind takes on meaning for an individual apprehending that object, as soon as that individual places the object in relation to areas of his lived experience – that is, in relation to a collection of other objects that belong to his or her experience of the world. (Nattiez 1990, p.9)

Taking into account that merely tracing a work's symbolic message or the artist's intentions is, arguably, insufficient to establish its meaning, a working definition of participatory meaning-making is formulated as follows:

As opposed to merely reproducing symbolised content, the artist's intentions, formal properties, historical contexts, etc., *meaning-making* entails that the artwork extends unique and personal significance for the viewer.

Finally, it is noted that meaning-makers as they are understood here, do not produce interpretations that must stand up to critique or add to a 'pool' of existing interpretations; the value of the 'meaning made' lies in its personal relevance to the viewer.²⁹ The concept of meaning advanced here also differs from those that focus on the "*meaning of artistic forms*" relative to the '*uses*' "*made of these forms by society at large*" (Bishop 2012, p.30).

²⁹ In that the notion of meaning-making advanced here differs from discussions such as whether the smile of the Mona Lisa rotated by 90 degrees reveals a male nude or whether Leon Trotsky's face is incorporated in Vera Mukhina's 1937 '*Worker and Collective Farm Woman*' (Gamboni 2002, p.17).

1.4.2 Intellect and Reflection

It is acknowledged that thinking about works of art as a subcategory of thinking in general is a highly complex process. To posit clearly separate areas, such as *intellect* (or *cognition* or *reflection*) versus *emotions* (or *affects* or *feelings*), would be a debatable endeavour. Thoughts are accompanied by emotions and these can be conscious or unconscious, verbal or nonverbal – all terms that would in themselves have to be properly defined. In this thesis, the terms *intellect* and *intellectual* are chosen for heuristic reasons, in the expectation that they will be understood as distinct from all human activity that can be described as emotional (see next section). They are used in accordance with the definition provided by The Oxford English Dictionary, as:

*That faculty, or sum of faculties, of the mind or soul by which a person knows and reasons; power of thought; understanding; analytic intelligence ... Intellect generally excludes, and is sometimes distinguished from, sensation, imagination, and will.*³⁰

Without attempting to broach the complexities of human intellect, the notion of *reflection* as a *crucial intellectual activity* is assumed. To *reflect* means to draw on and re-combine existing concepts and relations between these concepts (Gregory 1970; Snyder & Barlow 1988; Perkins 1994), whereas *concept* is understood here in agreement with education researchers Joseph D. Novak and Bob Gowin as a perceived pattern or “*regularity in events or objects, designated by a label*” (Novak & Gowin 1984, p.4). Concepts are clustered propositions (*what* or *how* an object or event *is* or *acts*), exemplars, prototypes or definitions (Smith et al. 1981). The complex interrelation between these clusters forms a crucial part of a person’s knowledge and belief structure.

When a viewer *reflects*, her/his existing structure is modified. The underlying process does not in itself take place in conscious verbal language. Emotions, images and apprehensions associated with concepts can remain

³⁰ “intellect, n.”. The Oxford English Dictionary (2010).

entirely inaccessible.³¹ Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson suggested that a range of mental processes operate pre-linguistically when meaning is made from texts (spoken and written), images, and films (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Processes like ‘*conceptual blending*’ and ‘*metaphorical projection*’ illuminate contextual and situational conditions rather than grammatical structures (Fauconnier & Turner 2002; Lakoff & Johnson 1980). The relation between verbal thinking and meaning-making is instrumental as education theorist David Perkins pointed out: “[L]anguage adopts a sort of pointing function, which guides our senses to recognize things not apprehended before” and “helps to heighten and stabilize perception” (Perkins 1977, p.90; 1994, p.40). Words are rather the tip of the iceberg – that which allows us to navigate in the conceptual world. Accordingly, *reflection* may also be understood as that process of navigation.

1.4.3 Emotion

Emotion is yet another necessary but ambiguous term employed throughout the thesis.³² In the present context it is important to regard *emotions* as distinct from *intellect* although it is understood that this dualism is not undisputed. It will be maintained here mainly for heuristic purposes. The Oxford English Dictionary defines emotion as:

*Originally: an agitation of mind; an excited mental state. Subsequently: any strong mental or instinctive feeling, as pleasure, grief, hope, fear, etc., deriving esp. from one's circumstances, mood, or relationship with others.*³³

This definition is in line with the view that emotions comprise essentially an affective appraisal of one's own bodily state and/or one's environment and a

³¹ Ivor A. Richards observed that: “For handling feeling we have nothing at all comparable” to logical language. “We have to rely upon introspection, a few clumsy descriptive names for emotions, some scores of aesthetic adjectives and the indirect resources of poetry ... For a feeling even more than an idea or an image tends to vanish as we turn our introspective attention upon it. We have to catch it by the tip of its tail as it decamps. Furthermore, even when we are partially successful in catching it, we do not yet know how to analyse it” (Richards 1929, p.207).

³² For overviews of discussions regarding the definition of emotion, see: Roald (2007, chap.one), Solomon (2003, 2010), Parkinson (2012).

³³ “emotion, n.”. The Oxford English Dictionary (2011).

state of physiological arousal (James 1884³⁴, Robinson 2004, Prinz 2005). An emotion's phenomenological valence (positive or negative) represents an evaluation of one's current situation. Emotional evaluation takes place much faster than cognitive evaluation (categorisation, reflective judgement, etc.) (Robinson 2004, Prinz 2005). Psychologists have argued against this feeling-based view that emotions are cognitive phenomena in themselves or at least inseparably correlated with cognitive appraisals.³⁵ I cannot follow up this ramified debate here³⁶ but – whilst using the term emotion in accordance with the Oxford English Dictionary's definition – a close relation between emotion and cognition is not disputed. On the one hand, this complies with our common experience that feelings trigger reflection; we often try to rationalise or even 'explain away' certain feelings ('there is no reason to be jealous'; 'spiders are not frightening'). On the other, one's own reflection and imagination can stir up emotions (recalling an accident, picturing future success, etc.).

In the vein of common experience – the *"everyday, commonsense ontology of emotion"* (Goldie 2002, p.247) – the word emotion is used here first and foremost in the phenomenological sense; as something that is experienced before, or without ever being specified as *pleasure, grief, hope, fear*, etc. (Goldie 2000, 2002). Although specific emotions can themselves be meaningful (from an evolutionary perspective for example, fear is meaningful in that it triggers heightened awareness), emotions will be regarded in the context of meaning-making as a vehicle for the reflections they trigger. This approach follows the view of sociologist Norman K. Denzin, as he argued that *"the labels applied to emotional experience are always shifting and are subject to new or different interpretation"*, and that *"[t]he meaning of a given emotion lies in the interpretation a person brings to it"* (Denzin 1994, p.5).

³⁴ William James posited that all emotions are rooted in physiological responses to stimuli. A closely related theory was developed independently by psychologist Carl Gustav Lange (1885); taken together their approach became known as James-Lange theory of emotion; for a review and critique, see Cannon (1927).

³⁵ Psychologists Stanley Schachter and Jerome E. Singer, for example, argued that people must search for clues in their environment to know what they are feeling since the symptoms of physical arousal are too similar in different emotions to be automatically differentiated (Schachter & Singer 1962). For a brief summary of views regarding emotion as cognition, see Roald (2007, pp.22–23).

³⁶ The reader is directed to Lewis et al. (2010).

1.5 Methodology

This research builds on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, bringing together philosophical perspectives with scientific concepts as well as theories regarding human response in general, and to art in particular. Findings from these fields are compared to historical and contemporary strategies employed by artists to engage viewers. These strategies are assessed for their potential to shed light on viewers' active participation in the meaning-making process. It is hypothesised that otherwise divided perspectives from psychology (partly overlapping with biology and sociology), philosophy and art history, can yield a better understanding, definition, and clearer model of meaning-making, which can be brought to bear on contemporary art practice.

The research task is a philosophical one in so far as the definition of meaning and meaning-making is an epistemological question. Furthermore, the research topic is intertwined with existing philosophical discourses – as in Eco's concept of the Open Work, post-structuralist debates on authorship and subjectivity and pragmatist art theories – that must be addressed. Finally, there is an apparent logical paradox to be solved: *How can it be artists' justified intention not to be asked for their intentions?*

The research question is also intrinsically related to human psychology. It builds on assumptions of how people *do* respond to art. This premise would be untenable without empirical support. Furthermore, it is a question of a more psychological nature to identify strategies that influence the way viewers process artworks. As a consequence, both philosophical and psychological/scientific sources will be drawn upon.

Ideas are tested as they develop on the work of various contemporary artists including Tony Oursler, Alfredo Jaar, Tino Sehgal and others. These artists are exemplary in that they highlight questions that may have broad implications for our understanding of how contemporary art can enhance meaning-making.

1.5.1 Specific Methods

The investigative tools employed are mainly conventional methods of collecting, selecting, organising and comparing information available from various fields of study. Using examples from contemporary art, the similarities and differences between agendas, methods, and strategies of artists will be identified, assessed, and discussed. Claims made regarding the reception of art are aligned and developed in tandem with statements artists themselves have made as well as various viewer testimonials. Most of these testimonials were retrieved from the Internet and identified by the *Google* search engine using logical connectors. For instance, the concept '*meaning to*' (somebody) [as opposed to '*meaning of*' (something)] was explored in relation to experiences with art using the following algorithm:

“meaningful to me” OR “means to me” OR “meant to me” AND gallery
OR exhibition OR museum AND art OR artwork OR painting OR
installation OR sculpture OR “work of art”

Each search for a testimonial comprised a compulsory personal pronoun ('I', 'my', 'me'), which limited the results mostly to personal statements made in blogs but also to sources like journalistic exhibition reviews and conference papers recounting personal experiences.

Using blog data for research purposes is an accepted method in the social sciences (Wakeford & Cohen 2008; Jones & Alony 2008) and yields similar benefits here. Testimonials regarding a wide range of questions are retrievable and can be treated as emerging 'naturally' rather than resulting from the interaction with interviewees.³⁷ The disadvantages of this method are that researchers will often have little to no reliable data about the person whose statement they use (gender, age, occupation, etc.) and are limited to an ill-defined target group ('people publishing their opinion on the web'). For the purpose of this thesis, these complications do not pose a problem since the testimonials are not used to cluster information or to identify potential consent, trends, or draw other generalisable conclusions. They demonstrate the

³⁷ It is one of the vulnerabilities of data resulting from face-to-face interviews or questionnaires that interviewees often present themselves in a favourable light, a process sometimes referred to as '*impression management*' or '*social desirability bias*' (Tedeschi 1981).

possibility of certain kinds of experience with, or evaluation of, works of art, which would otherwise remain purely hypothetical. Using such examples is common in both philosophical and scientific fields. A single demonstrative instance is a necessary condition for a hypothesis' validity. To seek further empirical evidence (for example from audience studies), extends this method and fosters the cogency of any newly proposed concept, a principle that does not exclude art theory. Nevertheless, anecdotal examples do not function as empirical *evidence* since the validity of the statements must remain unconfirmed. These examples thus function as thought experiments that examine and illustrate arguments in real-life situations.

1.5.2 Justification of the Methodology

It is one thing to argue that art and theory can benefit from empirical and scientific sources and another to prepare and filter such information in a thesis. The former is a question of opinion (addressed in 1.2.2 and 6.2.1), the latter, concerns the thesis' methodological coherence. One discipline may take for granted what another questions, or define a term in an incompatible way. To account for this problem, some research premises and key terms have been defined in the previous section.

This thesis emerges as part of a practice-based PhD, which is a comparatively new field of study that has no universally accepted standards or methods in place. Moreover, many of the references used in this thesis are in themselves not easily classified as belonging to one discipline alone. The work draws, for example, on Wolfgang Iser's reception theory in the field of literature, which is informed by hermeneutics, phenomenology and Gestalt psychology. John Dewey's *'Art as experience'* (another recurring reference) is as much influenced by bio-psychology as by philosophy and pedagogy. When psychologist Bjarne S. Funch presents his *'existential phenomenological'* approach to art appreciation, he argues not unlike a philosopher.³⁸ This thesis hopes that drawing on philosophical and scientific theories will reveal where

³⁸ Funch mentioned briefly that his argument is based on interviews and introspective studies but provides no details regarding these sources (see chapter three). Funch assured, however, that he could have provided a separate chapter with empirical data (Funch 2013, personal communication).

they overlap, mutually enforce each other, and produce a sound argument that subscribes exclusively to neither.

1.6 Chapter Overview

Following this introduction, chapter two presents an art historical review of strategies artists have been using to engage the viewer in the meaning-making process. Existing accounts by art historians and art critics are surveyed and in some cases elaborated through findings from psychology and Wolfgang Iser's reception theory. Strategies first identified by pre-Modern and Modern artists are aligned with contemporary examples.

Chapter three addresses the definition of meaning and meaning-making, and distinguishes the 'meaning of' the artwork from the 'meaning to' the viewer. The relation between art's meaning and becoming emotionally affected as well as being a source of potential personal benefit are discussed. Within this discussion the role of verbalisation as the *making* in meaning-making is given special attention, and it is considered whether meaning can remain altogether ineffable. A taxonomy is proposed to classify three varieties of meaning-making. This includes meaning-making as an effort to *retrieve* or *speculate about* meaning with a focus on the work's objective features, and the construction of meaning in a *separative* way, that is focusing instead on an artwork's subject matter.

The fourth chapter addresses the apparent paradox of the artist having the intention not to be asked for intentions. This discussion leads to a distinction between *semantic* and *modal* intentions. After this, it is considered which *responsibilities* and *possibilities* artists have to convey the information necessary for viewers to make meaning on appropriate terms, and whether such appropriate terms can be aligned with the objective of meaning-making as an open-ended process. The sphere of the artist's influence (and its limitations) is divided into context-related and work-related strategies. Examples of both are discussed; the former focusing on the relation between context and meaning in art, and the latter addressing a balance between emotion-fostering and reflection-fostering stimuli as a crucial variable to facilitate meaning-making.

Chapter five discusses artworks by Alfredo Jaar, Tony Oursler, Superflex and Tino Sehgal in greater detail to expose their features and strategies to

foster the viewer's participation in meaning-making. These features and strategies are illuminated through various concepts from psychology, sociology, film theory and other disciplines and it is examined how they appeal to innate and culturally determined response mechanisms. Whilst this discussion focuses on the potential utility of non-art theories to explore artworks' response-inviting structures, the final part of the chapter looks at the specific theory developed in this thesis and how it can be applied to art practice. To that end, an example from the practice element of this project is discussed.

The final chapter summarises research findings and discusses implications for the fields of art theory and criticism as well as higher and museum education in art. Chapter six proceeds to address limitations and questions that have arisen during the research process but could not be answered within its scope. This leads to a consideration of possible future directions that researchers might take to address those questions.

Note on referencing: To make citations immediately datable, I include the original years of publication in cases where they differ from the source cited, separately in square brackets. The years provided there refer to the publication date in the original language (if other than English), for example: (Eco 1989 [1962]). Up to three references are reproduced in the text. To ease reading longer lists, sources are placed in footnotes.

CHAPTER TWO: VIEWER ENGAGEMENT AND MEANING-MAKING: HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

The viewer is part of the work. I try to communicate with him by stimulating his memory: the viewer has the right to interpret the picture as he likes, to make his own picture. For me it's enough simply to give him signs, to communicate with him without trying to teach or direct him. I want to bring out the viewer's interior and invisible powers.

Christian Boltanski, 1985¹

It has been recorded that at the 1763 *salon* of Paris, Denis Diderot became angry over François Boucher's use of colour. The philosopher complained about the painter's arrogance to depict a mystical light which may be like that of *'Thabor and that of paradise'* but that no human could ever have seen and appropriately reproduced. Diderot concluded: *"When one writes, must one write everything? When one paints, must one paint everything? Please let my imagination supply something"* (Adhemar & Sez nec 1975, p.205). Reference to the viewer's participation in the meaning-making of a painting was highly unusual at the time.² For centuries paintings had been expected to convey the morals of Christianity and Mythology, to immortalise important personalities or record historical events. Rather than being actively involved in meaning-making, it was assumed that viewers of artworks would be either educated or pleased. This chapter highlights some exceptions, tracing how the viewer's engagement became a viable artistic objective, and eventually a widely pursued creative aim. All people cited in this chapter are art historians unless otherwise indicated.

¹ Boltanski & Davvetas (1996 [1985], p.517)

² Another example would be the priest and essayist Archibald Alison (1812) who emphasised the importance of the viewer's association and imagination in the aesthetic experience, referred to by him as *'attentive contemplation'* (for a discussion, see: Townsend 1988).

2.1 Pre-Modern Precedents

The history of the viewer's invitation to the meaning-making process has been traced as far back as the Renaissance (Shearman 1992; Didi-Huberman 1995 [1990]) but truly open-ended narratives did not appear before the 17th century. Many scholars have hinted at Diego Velazquez's 1656 '*Las Meninas*' as fostering multiple viewpoints and interpretations.³ Another example is Nicholaes Maes' 1655 '*The Eavesdropper with a Scolding Woman*' (Fig. 5). Wolfgang Kemp observed that what is hidden behind a curtain that covers a large part of the picture, and what the maid in the image is hearing, is left entirely to the viewer's imagination (Kemp 1998 [1986], pp.189–194). This appeal to the viewer is further enhanced by the maid's direct gaze. Maes provided a variety of cues (the domestic scene, facial expressions, etc.) to limit the scope of feasible interpretations but he did not bestow the work with any secret code or structure, the discovery of which solves the riddle or yields a moral insight.



Fig. 5: Nicholaes Maes, *The Eavesdropper with a Scolding Woman*, 1655, oil on panel, 46.3 x 72.2 cm.

Private collection. Reproduction: JarektUploadBot / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain (PD-old-100)



Fig. 6: Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Syndics of the Drapers' Guild*, 1662, oil on canvas, 191.5 cm x 279 cm.

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Reproduction: The Yorck Project: 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei. DVD-ROM, 2002. Distributed by Directmedia Publishing GmbH (GNU-FDL PD-old-100)

The technique of letting characters gaze at the viewer – a strategy used *to refer the viewer back to her/himself (as viewer)* – was frequently applied in Dutch genre painting, but not theoretically acknowledged until the 19th century. In 1858 Théophile Thoré noted that Rembrandt's 1662 '*Syndics of the Drapers Guild*' (Fig. 6) "*seem to talk to you and provoke you to respond*" (Olin 1989,

³ See: Alpers (1983; 2005), Foucault (2002 [1966]).

p.287). Partly building on Thoré, Alois Riegl critiqued the idea of the artwork as a hermetically closed and coherent whole (Riegl 2000 [1902]). Riegl discussed how painters like Rembrandt addressed the audience directly by orchestrating the gaze and gestures of the depicted characters in order to have viewers confront their own consciousness with that of those figures.⁴

Riegl's theoretical observations coincide with the increasing attention the beholder as meaning-maker was given by practitioners of his (early Modern) time (see 2.2 and 2.3). Riegl identified the same interest, although comparatively subtle, in examples from earlier periods. Kemp's identification of Maes' curtain as 'blinking out' information reflects Riegl's findings; Pierre-Paul Proudhon's 1808 *'Justice and Divine Vengeance Pursuing Crime'* (Fig. 7) offers another example:

[T]he fact that the culprit has eyes only for his victim, thinks only of his escape, and does not see what is brewing above him is a functional blank that the viewer must fill in. (Kemp 1985, p.108)

Kemp adopted the term *'blank'* from the literature theory of Wolfgang Iser to denote information suspended or withheld by the artist.⁵ When blanks were left for the audience to complete the narrative in 18th and 19th century paintings, they were mostly intended to prompt the viewer to put her/himself in the position of depicted characters (like the culprit in Proudhon's painting) and live through the depicted moment. The painting's moral however, remained usually pre-structured by the artist.⁶ A slightly more open narrative can be found, according to Stefan Germer, in Pierre-Narcisse Guérin's 1799 work *'The Return of Marcus Sextus'* (Fig. 8) (Germer 1992). Like Proudhon's, Guérin's painting appeals to the viewer's empathy with the hero but the fact that *Marcus Sextus* is not a

⁴ For more recent discussions of Dutch genre paintings' appeal to the viewer's contribution, see: Becker (1993), Puttfraken (2000, pp.12–17).

⁵ According to Iser's literature theory, *blanks* are initiated by authors as they abbreviate certain details, interrupt the plot, give the text *'unexpected directions'*, abruptly juxtapose segments or suspend the connectability between segments (Iser 1994 [1976]; 1989). Generally speaking, blanks designate gaps between textual elements that have to be filled in by the reader's hypothesis. See also Iser's definition of blanks on pp.50/51)

⁶ This observation is still useful to determine limits of meaning-making. A merely ostensible openness was attested to many participatory practices since the 1990s (see 2.11). Artist and writer Dave Beech, for example, remarked that the participant of art events like those of Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jeremy Deller, Santiago Sierra and Johanna Billing, is typically *"not cast as an agent of critique or subversion but rather as one who is invited to accept the parameters of the art project"*, rather, the participants *"enter into a pre-established social environment"* in which the artist has already assigned them a specific role (Beech 2008, p.3). For related critiques, see: Kester (2004; 2011).

mythologically coded but an invented character offers more flexibility to complete his story. Germer elaborated:

[T]he beholder is confronted with the decisive segment of an incomplete linear narrative; the moment between the return of Marcus Sextus and his reaction to the misery that had afflicted his family in his absence. (Germer 1992, p.29)



Fig. 7: Pierre-Paul Proudhon, *Justice and Divine Vengeance Pursuing Crime*, 1808, oil on canvas, 294 x 244 cm.

Musée de Louvre, Paris. Reproduction: WikiPaintings / Public Domain (PD-old-100)



Fig. 8: Pierre-Narcisse Guérin, *The Return of Marcus Sextus*, 1799, oil on canvas, 243 x 217 cm.

Musée de Louvre, Paris. Reproduction: WikiPaintings / Public Domain (PD-old-100)

However, the viewer's invitation to make sense of what preceded the hero's return was not completely free but conditioned, Germer argued, by the envisioned audience at the 1799 *Salon*: mainly people who recalled the French revolution as an act of thetic brutality and who were expected to interpret the picture as a metaphor and critique of the recent violence. Such

reception premises need to be taken into account when interpreting both historical and contemporary art. Guérin's example highlights the importance of considering the cultural and political context in which art is presented. This can also be seen in the more recent example of Alfredo Jaar's Billboard 'A Logo for



Fig. 9: Alfredo Jaar, *A Logo for America*, 1987, lightboard (altering graphics); Times Square, New York.

Courtesy of the artist. Photo: alfredojaar.net

America' (1987), which caused no particular public reaction when it was shown at New York's Times Square (Fig. 9) but facilitated significant controversy when presented in Miami, given local ethnic tensions and ambiguities arising from the Spanish translation of the title. Some residents took the slogan '*This is not America*', which appeared on 16 billboards throughout the city, as sarcastic commentary regarding the huge Hispanic population, others as a reflection on people living in certain neighbourhoods (Valdés-Dapena 1998).

2.2 *Blanks and Negation*

Towards the end of the 19th century the use of blanks gained new significance: "*[T]he artist is no longer the fabricator of solid data and relations; instead he arranges spaces and surfaces, which are open to projective activity of the beholder*" (Kemp 1985, p.114). Blanks now provide the viewer with a new and no longer moralising kind of

guidance. Kemp used Léon Gérôme's 1868 painting '*The Execution of Marshal Ney*' (Fig. 10) as an example and argued that it prompts the viewer to reconstruct the events immediately preceding the depicted moment. Ney's execution is not shown but implied by the evidence remaining; bullet holes in the wall, the dead man on the ground, and a group of withdrawing soldiers:

For what happened [and] is no longer visible but ... nonetheless of crucial importance for the action of the picture – namely, the firing squad, the shots, the execution of state power – all remains situated in the area before the picture, in the blank, invisible and yet present both in its traces in the picture ... and as picture. (Kemp 1985, p.112)

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Fig. 10: Léon Gérôme, *The Execution of Marshal Ney*, 1868, oil on canvas, 65.2 x 104.2 cm.

Galleries and Museums Trust, Sheffield. Photo: Bridgeman Artt

By not showing the execution itself, the work involves the viewer in the evaluation of a contentious historical event:⁷

It then could not prevent, and in all likelihood did not want to prevent, the object of historical painting from surreptitiously changing: in the place of history, happening; instead of manifest intelligibility, contingency; instead of sense, sensory data; instead of comprehension on the part of the beholder, suspense. Such were – expressed epigrammatically – the new options. (Kemp 1985, p.114)

The example highlights that these ‘*new options*’, which gained particular importance with the rise of abstraction, also have their place within the narrative tradition of painting. ‘*Contingency*’ of the narrative, coupled with a special interest in ‘*sensory data*’ (such as peculiar lighting or colour) and ‘*suspense*’ of an unequivocal message became signature strategies of 20th century Realists like Edward Hopper and Eric Fischl.⁸ What Vivian Green Fryd says about Hopper’s work is equally true with regard to Gérôme’s ‘*Execution of Marshal Ney*’ and, to an extent, Guérin’s ‘*Marcus Sextus*’:

[T]he narrative implied through the figures, objects and settings is never completed. Consequently, the narrative consists of both absence and presence: incomplete information is provided by the artist, while the viewer, filling in the details, creates his or her own narrative. (Green Fryd 2003, p.118)

Artists can rely on viewers’ urge to do so. Anthropological, sociological and neuroscientific research suggests that apparently incongruous situations and blanks appeal to the human propensity to reconcile disparities, which we achieve by providing missing information in order to ‘*cultivate continuity*’ (Heath 2006).

⁷ Wolfgang Kemp summarised the historical facts: Ney “*had incurred a grievous guilt when he betrayed the cause of the Bourbons in 1815 and went over to Napoleon, taking his troops with him. The legal proceedings initiated against him, however, were not only extremely questionable from a juridical point of view – in addition, their conclusion was dictated by the political motive of finding a scapegoat for the ‘Hundred Days’.* Ney’s rehabilitation was not accomplished [until] the 1860s ... Gérôme did not intervene in an undecided rehabilitation suit with his choice of a subject, nor did he ingratiate himself with the government of Napoleon ... [A]nyone who looked for a pro or a contra in Gérôme’s treatment of it could discover evidence for both positions” (Kemp 1985, p.118/119).

⁸ For discussions, see: Linker (1984), Homes (1995). Eric Fischl explained: “*I’m not interested in narrative in the strict sense, as a kind of linear progression. I try to create a narrative whose elements have no secure, ascribed meanings so that an effect of greater pregnancy can be generated than in customary straightforward narrative*” (Kuspit & Fischl 1987, p.38).

A concept closely related to the blank in Iser's theory is *negation*.⁹ Used by Iser, the term describes a kind of questioning of social norms that does not plainly reject existing conditions, but highlights where conventions and descriptions of the world are weak and in need of re-consideration. To perform such reconsideration is a challenge that the author issues to the reader without, however, pre-determining any solution. An example of this strategy from the field of early Modern painting is Edgar Degas' depictions of laundresses (Figs. 11 and 12).



Fig. 11: Edgar Degas, *Women Ironing*, 1884, oil on canvas, 76 x 81 cm.

Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Reproduction: The Yorck Project: 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei. DVD-ROM, 2002. Distributed by Directmedia Publishing GmbH (GNU-FDL PD-old-100)

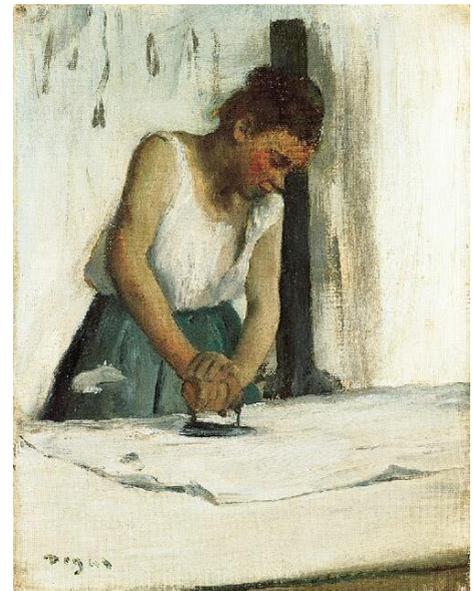


Fig. 12: Edgar Degas, *The Laundress*, 1873, etching and aquatint, plate: 11.7 x 15.9 cm; sheet: 20.3 x 23.8 cm.

Norton Simon Museum of Art, Pasadena. Reproduction: Courtesy of the Norton Simon Art Foundation

In late 19th century France, laundresses had a reputation for being sexually permissive and generally vulgar.¹⁰ Although working at a time when it was not unusual for artists to denounce social disparities, Degas did not set out to

⁹ For an in-depth discussion, see: Fluck (2000). There are various theories of negation in postmodern critical theory, mostly focussing on the boundaries of discursive expression in fiction and prose. Theatre scholar Daniel Fischlin noted that negation theorists typically criticise “both the ‘noise’ of affirmative discourse and of the unrepresentable ‘silence’ of the negative discourse that underlies postmodern notions of textuality” (Fischlin 1994, p.2).

¹⁰ Eunice Lipton explained that this reputation is to an extent owed to the fact that laundresses had to work in devastating heat that caused them to “violate middle-class standards of dress and ‘lady-like’ conduct”, often picked up and delivered laundry from bachelors, and were notorious for drinking, though seeking escape from the daily strain (Lipton 1982, p.282).

campaign against this misjudgement. In fact, he picked up on erotic notions¹¹ but, as Eunice Lipton observed, “*graced his images with a dignity that was highly unusual given his culture*” (Lipton 1982, p.281). Contemporary viewers were prompted to re-evaluate their own image of laundresses; Degas aroused expectations “*by the presence of the familiar*” and their concurrent “*defamiliarization*”, to use the words of Iser (Iser 1994 [1976], p.213). The women appear tacitly seductive but they are not posing, they are working. Degas’ (impressionist) view of their workplace is romanticised but critical at the same time. Lipton elaborated:

Degas captures the ritualistic nature of ironing and forces us to see it. He does not, as the Degas literature would have us believe, merely wrap the women in a hazy glow of palpable light, nor is he simply fascinated with motion. Rather his drawing and spatial constructions reveal the women’s solitude, their withdrawal, their fatigue. And when for a moment we are no longer only mesmerized by the magical light and brilliant drawing, we may be shocked to find ourselves face-to-face with the boredom and alienation inherent in such labour. (Lipton 1982, p.282)

This strategy of ambiguity is akin to Iser’s idea of negation:

[T]here is no blanket rejection of the encapsulated norms, but instead there are carefully directed, partial negations which bring to the fore the problematical aspects and so point the way to the reassessment of the norms. (Iser 1994 [1976], p.213)

The “*differentiation in attitude*” that negation aims to facilitate, depends on the reader being “*blocked off from familiar orientations*”, whilst remaining unable to “*gain access to unaccustomed attitudes*” (Iser 1994 [1976], p.213). Evoking such a state in viewers became especially salient with the new treatment of the nude at the end of the 19th century. In 1863, Édouard Manet famously confronted his audience with the nudity of ‘ordinary’ women (‘*Olympia*’; ‘*The Luncheon on the Grass*’). Up until then, the depiction of nudity had mostly been tolerated only under religious or mythological pretexts; with these depictions the

¹¹ Lipton observes that the beholder is “*startled to notice not only her high colour but her unbuttoned bodice. She is working, but she is tacitly seductive too*” (Lipton 1982, p.278) (Fig. 12).

viewer had no justifiable reason for looking at (and being seen looking at)¹² naked bodies. *His* (less likely *her*) voyeuristic position is further enhanced by the fixing gaze of the women aimed directly at the viewer. As will be discussed later, this strategy of casting the viewer into the role of a voyeur to *refer her/him back to her/himself (as viewer)*, is evidenced also in many more recent examples.

In the vein of Iser's concept of negation, the examples of Degas and Manet illustrate the difference between *questioning* existing norms and behaviours and their outright *denunciation*. There is a history of artists – examples include John Heartfield, Diego Rivera, or Martha Rosler – leaving little doubt about their critical agenda and the moral they wish to convey.¹³ By contrast, Manet's and Degas' stance is less accusatory, instead they ask viewers to re-evaluate their views and come to their own conclusions. Contemporary examples of this strategy are Celia Shapiro's images of recreated death row meals in her '*Last Suppers*' series (2001) (Fig. 13) and Marc Quinn's marble sculptures of amputee models. Viewers' attentiveness is heightened when expectations aroused by '*the presence of the familiar*' (food on a tray) have been stifled by the knowledge of whose food they are looking at. Thus the viewer is '*blocked off*' from the familiar (innocuous) concept of food on a tray by the knowledge of who will consume it, yet the explicit context in which it exists and is to be consumed remains unfamiliar/inaccessible. The installation of Quinn's '*Alison Lapper (8 months)*' (2005-2007) (Fig. 14) on London's Trafalgar Square caused a public debate regarding the exploitation of disability for shock value versus the making visible of a social taboo (Millett 2008). The work features a portrait of

¹² Philosopher Alexander Nehamas addressed this aspect in relation to Marcel Duchamp's installation *Étant donné*s (1966), a three-dimensional interior, comprising a landscape arrangement and a twisted naked body of a woman holding a gas lamp. To see this arrangement, the viewer is required to step through a doorway and spy through a peephole. Nehamas commented: "*It is likely that most spectators strain to see a little more of the scene than is visually available to them: the management is designed to tantalize them in that direction. But this takes time, and inevitably produces embarrassment, which is especially profound if others are waiting their turn. The room is darkened, but not dark enough to hide one's face*" (Nehamas 1992, p.258). For an extended discussion, see: Fried (1996); for psychological evidence that viewing habits in galleries are influenced by other viewers, see: Pelowski (2007).

¹³ Some critics have taken issue with artistic agendas of outright critique. Jacques Rancière, for example, argued that Martha Rosler's '*Bringing the War Home*' series (1967–72, 2004, 2008) presupposes a viewer who already feels "*guilty about viewing the image that is to create the feeling of guilt*" because s/he knows to rejoice "*the prosperity rooted in imperialist exploitation of the world*" instead of acting against it (Rancière 2009, p.85). This suggests that the viewer already agrees with the artist. Rosler's work in question consists of photographic montages merging war imagery with middle and upper class domestic scenes.

Lapper, a British resident, born without arms and truncated legs in her eighth month of pregnancy.



Fig. 13: Celia A. Shapiro, *John William Rook - 09/19/86* (from the Last Supper series), 2001, cibachrome print, 51 x 61 cm.

Reproduction: Courtesy of the artist (©)



Fig. 14: Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper (8 months)*, 2000, marble, 83.5 x 40 x 65 cm; commissioned by: The Fourth Plinth Commission, Trafalgar Square, London (September 2005 – October 2007).

Photo: Loz Pycock / Public Domain (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Blanks and *negation* are often inseparable; in fact, Iser sometimes refers to the former as a special kind of the latter. A contemporary example is Santiago Sierra's various works in which people stand with their backs to the viewer. Sierra's work revolves around disparities of wealth and poverty, and the faces the viewer cannot face usually belong to socially



Fig. 15: Santiago Sierra, *89 Huicholes. San Andrés Jalisco. Jalisco, Mexico*, 2006, 84 black and white photographs, 30 x 22.5 cm.

Exhibition shown: Santiago Sierra, Magasin 3 Konsthall, Stockholm (2009). Photo: Collection Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall (©)

marginalised people such as members of the Huichole tribe in Mexico (Fig. 15) and homeless women in London.¹⁴ Their hidden faces are *blanks* to be filled in, obliging the viewer to “develop a specific attitude that will enable him to discover that which the negation has indicated but not formulated” (Iser 1994 [1976], p.213). Sierra himself confirmed that when a person's face is hidden ...

¹⁴ For his work “Group of persons facing the wall and person facing into a corner” shown at London's Tate Modern in 2008 Sierra paid homeless women the cost of an overnight stay in a hostel to stand in a line facing a gallery wall for one day.

... you have to think why does she not show me the face ... And in a world full of images, this image, which is an anti image in a way, becomes full of meaning, because the person has to create what the person doesn't see. (Sierra 2008, 1:06min)

This process of imagining is, according to Iser, the only way of making sense of the work (*"meaning can only be grasped as an image"*; Iser 1994 [1976], p.9). Although it will be argued that this view is ultimately too reductive, Iser hints at a crucial ideational component of meaning-making, which is exemplified by Sierra's thematisation of guilt and shame: the impossibility to capture meaning exhaustively by means of verbalisation. As an historic example of the close relation between blanks and negation as stimuli of imagination one might think of Maes' *'Eavesdropper'*. The maid invites the viewer to become her accomplice despite the negative connotation of secretly listening to other people's conversations (negation of a norm); whatever there is to be heard is blanked out by a veil.

2.3 Blanks and Pictorial Abstraction

With the early 20th century rise of pictorial abstraction, strategies of blanking out and negating acquired new dimensions. Arguably, it was Paul Cézanne who introduced the concept of the blank to the technical side of artistic creation when he left parts of the canvas literally unpainted (Fig. 17).¹⁵ Omitting, reducing, and distorting details became avant-garde methods.¹⁶ Artists including Wassily Kandinsky, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, became more interested in viewer response as they turned against the one-sidedness of realism, traditional morals and Enlightenment thought. The formal blank was carried to

¹⁵ To Cézanne himself this was probably rather a problem than a method as a 1905 letter to Émile Bernard indicates. The painter wrote that *"the abstractions ... do not allow me to cover my canvas entirely nor to pursue the delimitation of the objects where their points of contact are fine and delicate; from which it results that my image or picture is incomplete"* (Harrison 2006, p.35).

¹⁶ The dissociated and distorted forms that viewers were asked to identify and re-compose challenged them to reconsider what art is altogether. With regard to Pablo Picasso's *'Still Life with Antique Bust'* (1925), Peter Lodermeier pointed out that the painting's objects allow for two or more, mutually exclusive, interpretations. For instance, the mandolin's absence of strings can be regarded as an abbreviation or as the depiction of a genuinely string-less instrument; the limits of the balcony between the bowl and the bust can either be seen as a solid parapet with vertical cavities or as a fence with thin struts and wide distances (Lodermeier 1999, p.112). In 1935 Picasso said that once a painting is finished, *"it changes further, according to the condition of him who looks at it. A picture lives its life like a living creature, undergoing the changes that daily life imposes upon us. That is natural, since a picture lives only through him who looks at it"* (Picasso & Zervos 1985 [1935], p.49). For a discussion, see also: Markus (1996).

extremes in John Cage's silent performances, such as his 1952 composition 4'33 in which a piano is not being touched by its 'player' for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. Hans Belting described the way in which Cage "*devised zones of silence as zones of freedom where the audience was expected to become creative in the face of nothing*" (Belting 2002, p.391).

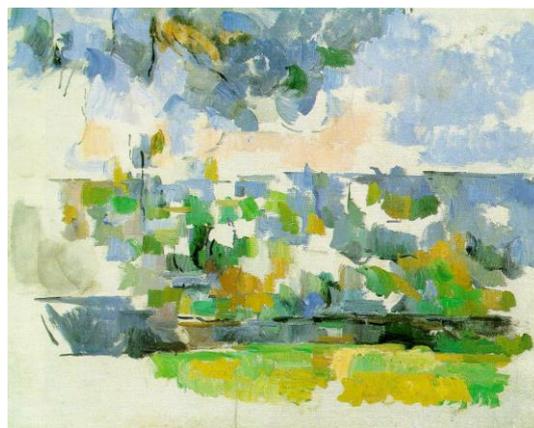


Fig. 16: Paul Cézanne, *The Garden at Les Lauves*, 1906, oil on canvas, 65.4 x 80.9 cm.

The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.
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The challenge to make meaning evolved alongside a growing emphasis on formal abstraction. Degas' painterly distortions still corresponded with his critical stance towards his chosen subject matter;¹⁷ the 20th century avant-gardes' criticality lies above all in the self-referential attitude of the artist who disobeys (*aesthetic*) rules. If artists negated any social norms, they did so at best indirectly, as philosopher Theodor W. Adorno says, by pointing "*to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life*" (Adorno 1978, p.317). Because of the *types* or genres of art with which this thesis is concerned, formal blanks and negation focussed on art's own norms need not be discussed in further detail.

2.4 Excursus: Philosophical Acknowledgement in the 20th Century

In art practice and its assessment by art historians, so in the philosophy of art the role of the viewer as meaning-maker has gained increasing recognition in the 20th century. In aesthetic theories, from Immanuel Kant to Adorno and Clement Greenberg, independence from purpose was regarded as art's key characteristic. A fundamental assumption of these theories is that art has no

¹⁷ Kathryn Brown observed: "*Throughout Degas's works, unconventional perspectives, distortions of scale, the disintegration of form, and the withholding of visual information configure the surface of the work as a simultaneous invitation and frustration of the spectator's attempt to comprehend fully the visual content of the work*" (Brown 2010, p.180). Lipton gave an example of what this means with regard to the laundresses, arguing that the beholder is forced to regard them "*at a distance across deep and activated spaces as well as from discomforting angles ... warning us to keep the distance*" (Lipton 1982, p.280).

distinct and determinable function that it is able to fulfil better than anything else. The only way to justify art was to situate it beyond purpose and function, and define it as having self-sufficient value; meaning was reserved for the artwork's internal coherence.

Educational theorist and philosopher John Dewey was one of the first to question the opposition of self-sufficient or '*intrinsic*', and '*instrumental*' value. In Dewey's view art was functional but not in the sense that it should or could be used to serve any defined goal or singular end. "*The work of esthetic art satisfies many ends, none of which is laid out in advance*", Dewey wrote; it "*serves life rather than prescribing a defined and limited mode of living*" (Dewey 2005 [1934], p.140). How it will '*serve life*' will be different from viewer to viewer. Martin Heidegger (2008 [1936]) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013 [1960]; 1986 [1977]) emphasised that artworks are inevitably approached with individual prejudices (or '*fore-meanings*') which provide points of entry to the work and foster a personal understanding or colouring of its truth.¹⁸ In the same vein, Ernst Gombrich referred to an inevitable '*beholder share*' (Gombrich 1977 [1960]).¹⁹ Heidegger, Gadamer and Gombrich appreciated that there is no *innocent look*, no contemplation uninfluenced by prior knowledge and previously contemplated images. However, they agree that the viewer's active participation consists in a more or less successful re-evocation of the artist's ideas. To what degree this is at all possible is questionable. With reference to their empirical studies of audiences, psychologists Hans and Shulamith Kreitler held against this view that "*not even on the level of the general meaning of the product of art is a correspondence to be expected between the artist's possible intention and the spectator's interpretations*" (Kreitler & Kreitler 1972, p.4/5).²⁰

A crucial step towards the acknowledgement of differences between the artist's and the viewer's thoughts as a genuine *quality* of art was made by

¹⁸ The artist must provide a certain direction for thought, a "*challenge which expects to be met*" but the answer, given by the one who accepts the challenge, "*must be his own, and given actively*" (Gadamer 1986 [1977], p.26). Gadamer argued that "*understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else's meaning*" and that this is indeed the productive moment of meaning-making: "*Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one's own thinking on the subject*" (Gadamer 2013 [1960], p.383; compare: chapter three, note 19).

¹⁹ Gombrich explained: "*Without some starting point, some initial schema, we could never get hold of the flux of experience. Without categories, we could not sort our impressions. Paradoxically, it has turned out that it matters relatively little what these first categories are. We can always adjust them according to need*" (Gombrich 1977 [1960], p.76).

²⁰ A closer relation between art-making and art-viewing was posited by psychologist Pablo Tinio (2013).

Umberto Eco in his 1962 *'The Open Work'*. Eco was suspicious of idealist and hermeneutic traditions, which maintain that to understand a work of art means, ultimately, to get in touch with (its) immutable truths regardless of the extent to which that is possible in practice. Against this background, he argued:

[T]he form of the work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood. (Eco 1989 [1962], p.3)

This idea of openness reflects Eco's philosophical position; he sees works of art as an *"epistemological metaphors"* for the fragmented world we inhabit:

The discontinuity of phenomena has called into question the possibility of a unified, definitive image of our universe; art suggests a way for us to see the world in which we live, and, by seeing it, to accept it and integrate it into our sensibility. The open work assumes the task of giving us an image of discontinuity. It does not narrate it; it is it.

(Eco 1989 [1962], p.90)

In the field of visual art Eco finds this best represented by informal painting. Through a lack of conventional sense and order, these works are analogies of feelings of senselessness, disorder and shattered relations that the modern world evokes.²¹ Ultimately, Eco's position remains ambiguous. On the one hand he suggests that the viewer is invited to endow the work with personal meaning, constrained by certain defaults set by the artist. On the other he defined openness as ultimately rejecting any assignment of meaning.

2.5 Ready-Mades

Marcel Duchamp was one of the first artists to acknowledge in writing that the viewer makes a *'contribution to the creative act'*. Duchamp also introduced the term *"personal art coefficient"* to describe an artwork's *"arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed"* (Duchamp 1957, p.29). The resulting vagueness of each artwork's message automatically endows the work with scope for the viewer's interpretation. Duchamp's ready-mades challenge the propensity of viewers to seek meaning in the artist's message as these works instigate doubt as to who their real

²¹ Compare: Robey (1989, p.XIV).

author is, and, consequently, what the author's intentions might be. It is common to seek the intention behind ready-mades in the artist's gesture of, and questions raised about, the exhibition of a non-art object in an art context.²² With his famous urinal '*Fountain*' (1917) (Fig. 17), Duchamp further complicated such evaluations by signing the work with the pseudonym '*R. Mutt*', and by only exhibiting a photograph of the object by Alfred Stieglitz rather than the object itself. Thus, besides himself and the object's actual designer, yet another person now shared authorial rights.²³



Fig. 17: Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917, porcelain (ready-made) 36 x 48 x 61 cm / black and white photograph by Alfred Stieglitz; original missing.

Image originally published in: H.R. Roche, B. Wood, and M. Duchamp (eds.) (1917). *The Blind Man*. No. 2, p.4. Reproduction: Piero / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain (PD-old-70)



Fig. 18: Peter Friedl, *The Zoo Story*, 2007, taxidermied giraffe (ready-made), 720 x 1200 x 850 cm.

Exhibition shown/commissioned by: Documenta XII (2007), Kassel. Courtesy of the artist and Documenta. Photo: Jack Toolin / Public Domain (CC BY-NC 2.0)

A contemporary example of the ready-made strategy is Peter Friedl's '*The Zoo Story*', a stuffed giraffe exhibited at the 2007 Documenta (Fig. 18). The animal had died of heart failure in a Palestinian zoo during an Israeli bombing raid. Friedl views the work "*as a sculpture that can and should help visitors*

²² For discussions, see: De Duve (1996), Buskirk (2005).

²³ For discussions, see: Camfield (1989; 1991).

invent stories to go along with it" (cited by Deutsche Welle Online 2007, para.7). Both Duchamp and Friedl played with the notion of authenticity, but whilst Duchamp built on a categorical, intellectual confusion, Friedl appealed to meaning-making on the basis of emotional response.

Although expert viewers may be less influenced by emotions in their judgement of art than non-expert viewers (Leder et al. 2012), all stories viewers are inspired to invent are arguably influenced by an initial appreciation of the giraffe as cute, impressive, pitiful, etc.²⁴ In chapter four it will be argued that fostering emotional engagement is a crucial strategy for suspending the quest for artistic intentions, and promote instead more personal varieties of meaning-making.

2.6 Work Titles

Another facet of Duchamp's work is his use of apparently unrelated titles, such as the urinal entitled '*Fountain*'. Similarly, René Magritte, who also used titles hardly descriptive of the depicted content of his works, asks viewers to consider carefully what they see and to investigate ...

... certain characteristics of the objects such as are commonly ignored by one's consciousness but of which one sometimes has a presentiment when confronted by extraordinary events which one's reason has by no means been able to shed light upon yet. (Magritte cited by Paquet 2006, p.23)²⁵

The title of the work is thus being used as a distinct kind of blank consistent with Iser's definition:

The blanks break up the connectability of the schemata, and thus they marshal selected norms and perspective segments into a fragmented, counter-factual, contrastive or telescoped sequence, nullifying any expectation of good continuation. As a result, the imagination is automatically mobilized, thus increasing the constitutive activity of the reader, who cannot help

²⁴ For a general account of how emotions inform judgment and regulate thought, see: Clore and Huntsinger (2007); there seems to be a tendency that especially positive emotions encourage reflection and foster inspiration (Fredrickson 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan 2005; Thrash & Elliot 2003; 2004).

²⁵ Heath explained that unrelated titles "*introduce a discrepancy between what we know through our real-world experience and what we are led to perceive as real within his art. Hence we juxtapose two seemingly opposed views in order to make meaning of what is before us*" (Heath 2006, p.135).

but try and supply the missing links that will bring the schemata together in an integrated gestalt.
(Iser 1994 [1976], p.186)

Titles are usually welcomed by viewers as instructions, because they are understood to be guides towards a field of feasible interpretations.²⁶ Thus, apparently unrelated titles can simultaneously increase and decrease the scope of openness; they put the viewer on an 'interpretive track' but they also call into question the feasibility of this track. A related strategy involves the eschewal of titles altogether. "*Giving works neutral titles or calling them 'Untitled'*", art critic Arthur C. Danto explained, "*does not precisely destroy, only distorts the sort of connection here ... 'Untitled' at least implies it is an artwork, which it leaves us to find our way about in it*" (Danto 1981, p.119). Another related strategy is to imply the viewer's relation to the work through the title, as exemplified by Olafur Eliasson's frequent use of 'Your' as in '*Your windless arrangement*' (1997) and '*Your natural denudation inverted*' (1999).²⁷

2.7 Pop Art and the 1960s

Using ready-mades and apparently unrelated titles exemplify that amongst the decisions that artists take to guide the reception of their work are some that deliberately complicate the quest for 'intended' meaning and enhance the viewer's own '*contribution to the creative act*'. They are strategies that not only accept the '*personal art coefficient*' as an inevitable or merely 'interesting' corollary but actively promote it.²⁸ With the rise of Pop Art in the 1950s this

²⁶ For general discussions of how titles inspire viewers to construct meaning see: Bann (1985), Gombrich (1985), Russell and Milne (1997), Franklin (1988), Franklin et al. (1993), Belke et al (2010).

²⁷ Ina Blom criticised Eliasson for this strategy calling him an "*an über-producer controlling not only the creation of a set of conditions for viewing or perceiving, but also the particular effects those conditions will have on those who happen to be subjected to them. In fact, the range of control-factors is rather wide: The titles indicate not only the types of emotion that will be evoked, or the type of positioning that will take place, but sometimes even transformations the 'you' is likely to undergo*" (Blom 2002, p.20).

²⁸ Sol LeWitt merely arranged himself with the individual interpretations: "*It doesn't really matter if the viewer understands the concepts of the artist by seeing the art. Once out of his hand the artist has no control over the way a viewer will perceive the work. Different people will understand the same thing in a different way*" (LeWitt 1967, p.57). Jasper Johns treated the same fact more productively. He explained: "*There is a great deal of intention in painting; it's rather unavoidable. But when a work is let out by the arts and said to be complete, the intention loosens. Then it's subject to all kinds of use and misuse and pun. Occasionally someone will see the work in a way that even changes its significance for the person who made it; the work is no longer 'intention,' but the thing being seen and someone responding to it*" (Johns in Johns & Swenson 1964, p.43). This claim goes beyond the notion that viewers inevitably interpret works

momentum was systematically expanded. Artists sought to erase traces of individual handwriting, copying visual styles, images, and reproduction techniques used in the advertising and entertainment industries. Minimalism's denial of any symbolic interpretation took this strategy further, with artists using industrial materials and commissioning other people to produce their work.



Fig. 19: Tom Wesselmann, *Great American Nude No. 99*, 1968, oil on canvas, 206 x 152 cm.

Morton G. Neumann Collection, Chicago. Licensed by Bildrecht, Vienna, 2013 (©)

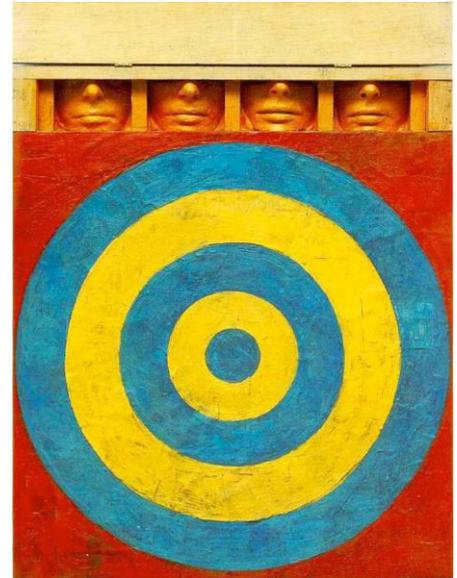


Fig. 20: Jasper Johns, *Target with four faces*, 1955, encaustic on newspaper and cloth over canvas surmounted by four tinted-plaster faces in wood box with hinged front, 85.3 x 66 x 7.6 cm.

Museum of Modern Art, New York. Licensed by Bildrecht, Vienna, 2013 (©)

Tom Wesselmann's '*Great American Nudes*' (Fig. 19), for instance, may equally be considered a (proto-feminist) critique of the equation of lust and commodity in advertising or a cheerful embrace of the availability of female nudity in popular culture (Wesselmann et al. 2003; McCarthy 1990). Another Pop Art innovation is Jasper Johns' (and later Robert Rauschenberg's)²⁹ appeal to physical engagement as a new strategy to *refer the viewer back to her/himself (as viewer)*. Johns' 1955 painting '*Tango*' features a small key protruding from the work that could be turned by the viewer to trigger sounds

of art according to personal dispositions, identified by Eco as '*openness of the first degree*', and supports what he called '*openness of the second degree*': The explicit aim of much modern art to foster a wide range of interpretive possibilities (Eco 1989 [1962], p.76).

²⁹ Rauschenberg's 1961 combine painting '*Black Market*' allows the viewer to leave messages on integrated clipboards and to exchange small items in the work. For a discussion of similar strategies also used by Ed Rasha, see: Allan (2010).

from a manipulated music box. Similarly, *'Target with four faces'* (1955) (Fig. 20) comprises flexible objects for the viewer to touch and use. For this work, Johns placed four plaster facial moulds inside boxes with movable lids above a painted target. In his monograph on Johns, Max Kozloff argued that the intention of these works was to *"provoke the spectator about the spectator's provocation"*, and that the content is not *"the thing seen"* but *"seeing it"* (Kozloff 1969, p.9). This notion of provocation is taken to extremes by some artists' use of mirrors. In Michelangelo Pistoletto's *'Vietnam'* (1962-65) (Fig. 21), for example, viewers find themselves participating in a political demonstration. What is at issue here is explicitly not what the work represents but what the viewer her/himself represents.³⁰

Referring the viewer back to her/himself (as viewer) was an important objective for many artists in the 1960s. Op Art invites the interrogation of discrepancies between illusion and reality, between comprehension and perception. Minimalism focuses on viewers' personal experience of the work as heightening awareness of the relation between themselves and the exhibition context. However, the artistic interest revolves around the individual's experience of the autonomous object, respectively, as artist Robert Morris said, *"aesthetic terms ... that find their specific definition in the particular space and light and physical viewpoint of the spectator"* (Morris 1995 [1966], p.234). Minimalist painter Darby Bannard established that Pop, Op and Minimalist artists all believed that meaning *"exists outside of the work itself"* and stressed



Fig. 21: Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Vietnam*, 1965, graphite and oil on cut transparent paper mounted on polished stainless steel, 2201 × 120 x 2 cm.

The Menil Collection, Houston. Courtesy of Fondazione Pistoletto ONLUS (©) and the Menil Collection (©) Photo: ONLUS. Image may not be reproduced without permission from both institutions.

³⁰ Compare: Ad Reinhardt's cartoon *'What Do You Represent?'* (chapter three, Fig. 34). Pistoletto played with notions of representation and described one of his interests in the use of mirrors as *"the inclusion in the work of the viewer and his/her surroundings (which make 'the self-portrait of the world')"* (Pistoletto 1964, para.2).

the works' capacity to trigger "*thought and emotion pre-existing in the viewer and conditioned by the viewer's knowledge*" (Bannard 1966, p.35). However, the knowledge envisioned here is not knowledge in general but rather knowledge ...

... of the style in its several forms, as opposed to the more traditional concept of a work of art as a source of beauty, noble thought, or whatever. ... [T]hese styles have been nourished by the ubiquitous question: 'but what does it mean?' These styles are made to be talked about. (Bannard 1966, p.35)

Bannard's statement emphasises that the Modernist trend to focus the viewer's attention on art's own foundations was expanded in the 1960s. Pop, Op and Minimal art (and much Concept Art) all introduced strategies to foster active participation – strategies that were later taken up by other artists to facilitate meaning-making. However, it was not the primary objective of most of these artists to make viewers reflect on *political, social, and/or cultural issues*, or their own position in the world.³¹

2.8 Physical Participation

It is questionable that ready-mades, the use of apparently unrelated titles, and the introduction of non-art imagery, materials, and production techniques do not foster asking why the *artist* has chosen these means. Arguably, exploring the boundaries between art and life meant for most artists of the 20th century avant-gardes to fathom how much *life* can be absorbed by *art* but always without risking the latter's integrity. By contrast, Allan Kaprow was fully aware that his work may not even be recognised as art:

I am not so sure whether what we do now is art or something not quite art. If I call it art, it is because I wish to avoid the endless arguments some other name would bring forth. (Kaprow 1961, p.59)

³¹ When there were exceptions, such as James Rosenquist's or Martha Rosler's responses to the Vietnam war, the messages were hardly ambiguous and offered little room for personal negotiation; compare: Pohl (2008, pp.438–447, 456–460).

In a sense reversing the idea of the ready-made, Kaprow's *happenings* do not bring non-art into the gallery but instead evacuate artistic concepts from it. For example, he took friends and students to specific sites where they performed a small action (Fig. 22). Kaprow was not interested in the role of the artist and the institution as meaning-giving authorities and he outrightly rejected the art world's whole occupation with itself. Kaprow demanded instead a *'lifelike art'*:



Fig. 22: Allan Kaprow, *Household: Women Licking Jam off of a Car*, 1964, activity.

Photo: Sol Goldberg, Allan Kaprow Papers. Licensed by Sol Goldberg Estate and Research Library and The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (980063) (©)

[T]he problem with artlike art, or even doses of artlike art that still linger in lifelike art, is that it overemphasizes the discourse within art, that is, art's own present discourse as well as its historical one ... lifelike art makers' principal dialogue is not with art but everything else ... (Kaprow & Morgan 1991, p.56)

Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica held a similar view as he argued in 1966 that the issue of knowing whether art is *"this"* or *"that"* or whether it ceases to be, should not even be raised. Instead, Oiticica, best known for his brightly coloured *'Parangolés'* – capes and banners meant to be worn by the audience while dancing³² – demands an ...

... Anti-art, in which the artist understands his/her position not any longer as a creator for contemplation, but as an instigator of creation – 'creation' as such: this process completes itself through the dynamic participation of the 'spectator,' now considered as 'participator.' Anti-art answers the collective need for creative activity which is latent and can be activated in a certain way by the artist. (Oiticica 2000, p.8/9 [1966])

³² These garments were made from cheap material and inspired by Oiticica's contacts with the samba school of Rio de Janeiro's largest favela. For a discussion, see: Dezeuze (2004).

Fellow artist Lygia Clark's *'Máscaras Sensoriais'* (1967) provide a graphic example. In this series of works, the audience is asked to wear hoods with objects or materials built in to cover their eyes and ears, and sometimes hold smelling substances under the nose. In one piece, a glass frame held mirrors instead of lenses, making the viewer look at images of her/his own eyes (Fig. 23).

For Kaprow the happening was, as Fluxus artist Dick Higgins formulated, “[a] game, an adventure, a number of activities engaged in by participants for the sake of playing” (Higgins 1976, p.268). Oiticica and Clark were interested in creating bodily experiences with the political agenda of freeing people’s oppressed



Fig. 23: Lygia Clark, *Máscaras Sensoriais*, 1967, mixed media, dimensions variable.

Exhibition shown: *Lygia Clark: Uma Retrospectiva*, Itaú Cultural, São Paulo (2012). Photo: *Laborativo* (laborativo.blogspot.com) (©).

creativity.³³ Although neither of them envisioned the viewer primarily as meaning-maker, both contributed significantly to this idea. Kaprow’s ambivalence towards the identity of his work ‘as art’ expands the discussion of meaning-making’s context-sensitivity. Oiticica and Clark asked for a creative appropriation of the artist’s material in the most outright, physical way, anticipating the relational practices of the 1990s and demonstrating that this was not only a legitimate creative objective, but in fact a political act.³⁴ Oiticica pointed out that the “social manifestation” of this art is also realised “in a more complex way through discourse” (Oiticica 2000 [1966], p.9) and Clark explained that the participant is “to invest his or her gesture with meaning” and this act is “nourished by thought” (Clark & Bois 1994, p.101). Art theorist Anna Dezeuze

³³ Oiticica called theirs “a totally anarchic position” (Oiticica 2000 [1966], p.9).

³⁴ This is to be seen against the backdrop of Brazil’s dictatorship at their time. Both Oiticica and Clark considered artists as ‘proposers’ whose work was meant to bring “the participant’s freedom of action to light” (Clark & Bois 1994, p.101). Clark further explained: “It’s crucial that the work not count in and of itself and instead be a simple springboard for the freedom of the author-spectator. The latter will become aware by means of the proposal offered by the artist” (Clark & Bois 1994, p.101).

confirmed this after having worn a *Parangolé* herself in public bearing phrases like ‘*Sex and violence, this is what I like*’ or ‘*I am hungry*’: “[They] ask me, the wearer, to reflect on who decides what I am – who actually ‘possesses’ or owns me” (Dezeuze 2004, p.67).



Fig. 24: VALIE EXPORT, *TAPP und TASTKINO (Tap and Touch Cinema)*, 1968; expanded cinema.

Courtesy of the artist and the photographer. Photo: Werner Schulz (©). Archiv VALIE EXPORT, Vienna (©). Licensed by Bildrecht, Vienna, 2013 (©)

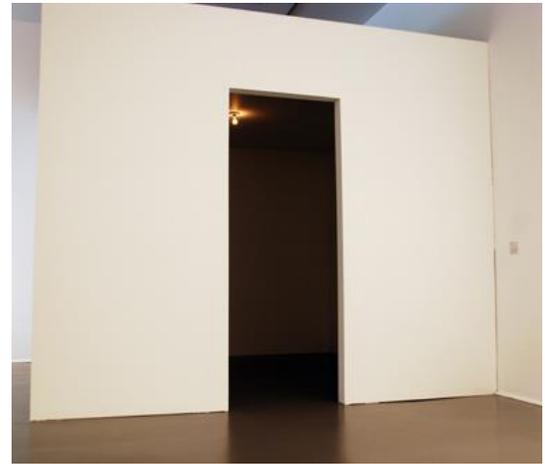


Fig. 25: Bruce Nauman, *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room*, 1968, wooden walls, speaker, light bulb, 402 x 304 x 304 cm (dimensions variable).

Exhibition shown: *Slightly Unbalanced*, Rodman Hall Arts Centre, St Catharines, Canada (2009). Photo: Derek Knight (©). Licensed by Bildrecht, Vienna, 2014 (©)

Kaprow, Oiticica and Clark established physical engagement as a form of active participation that went beyond the scope allowed by Johns and Rauschenberg. Also, they tested new modes of reception and participation by working outside the context of the gallery. These strategies can help divert the viewer’s attention from seeking meaning in coded messages and guide them towards a more personal engagement. Both strategies are combined in Valie Export’s 1968 ‘*Tap and Touch Cinema*’ (Fig. 24). In this performance and film project the artist allowed people in the street to touch her breasts through a curtained box fixed upon her chest. In this situation, participants confronted how they would be seen by passers-by, by the intently watching artist, and by viewers of the film recording their action. Bruce Nauman pursued a similar strategy with his installation ‘*Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room*’ (1968) (Fig. 25) but in this case the gallery context facilitates the effect. Visitors enter a tiny, dimly lit room in which they hear the words of the work’s title repeated by a stertorous, disembodied voice. Export and Nauman both appeal to an antagonism between emotional experience and intellectual awareness. The

text projections and other public displays. Another example is Rosemarie Trockel's 1993 installation of a large inscription behind the altar of Cologne's St. Peter church saying '*Ich habe Angst*' ('*I am scared*') (Fig. 27). The text comments on, and interacts with, the environment it is fit into, aiming to stimulate reflections on our social conditioning.

Trockel leaves open who states '*I am scared*' (literally: '*I have fear*') at the place which is usually reserved for a crucifix, and in a building people visit for spiritual consolation: Christ, 'the church', an invisible preacher, the artist, or any of them on behalf of the viewer/reader? What is the cause of this fear? Do the words replace *the Word*, which is usually enunciated from here? And how is one to respond? Questions like these are left to be reflected on by the reader/viewer.³⁵



Fig. 27: Rosemarie Trockel, *Ich habe Angst*, 1993, installation at St. Peter's church, Cologne.

Copyright: Rosemarie Trockel. Licensed by Bildrecht, Vienna, 2013. Photo courtesy Sprüth Magers Berlin London.

As in these examples, a text can constitute an entire work, or it can accompany it and provide necessary background information. Yet another way for text to function is as one of several elements in a larger arrangement. Victor Burgin uses this strategy extensively to challenge viewers to contemplate possible connections between picture and text. His 1978 '*Zoo 78*' (Fig. 28), juxtaposes the image of a girl in a peep show, a photo of a sentimental painting of the Brandenburg gate (at the time of the work's production hermetically cordoned off by the Berlin wall) hung up in front of floral wall paper, and an excerpt of Michel Foucault's critique of institutional control, originally published in his book '*Discipline and Punish*'. Various notions of observation, representation and memory are potentially common denominators, and how or whether the images illustrate the text and vice versa is a question presented for reflection. Burgin provides a direction of thought but leaves the conclusions, as

³⁵ For discussions of this work, see: Pocock (1993), Zink (2003, p.132/133).

he has repeatedly emphasised, to the viewer. “[M]y work”, Burgin asserted, “solicits active reflection on the part of the viewer/reader” (Burgin & Van Gelder 2010, para.31).



Fig. 28 a-c: Victor Burgin, *Zoo 78*, 1978/79, one of eight black and white photographic diptychs, each photograph: 50 x 75cm.

Text on right margin of Fig. 28a: “The plan is circular: At the periphery, an annular building; at the centre a tower, pierced with many windows. The building consists of cells; each has two windows: one in the outer wall of the cell allows daylight to pass into it; another in the inner wall looks onto the tower, or rather is looked upon by the tower, for the windows of the tower are dark, and the occupants of the cell cannot know who watches, or if anyone watches.”

Photos: Victor Burgin: *Una Exposición Retrospectiva* (catalogue of the exhibition at Funcadío Antoni Tapies, April 6th - June 17th, 2001). 28a and 28b: p.117; 28c (exhibition view Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 1979): p.114

2.10 Postmodern Meaning-Making

In 1978, Keith Haring noted in his journal:

The meaning of art as it is experienced by the viewer, not the artist. The artist's ideas are not essential to the art as seen by the viewer. The viewer is an artist in the sense that he conceives a given piece of his own way that is unique to him. His own imagination determines what it is, what it means. (Haring 2010, p.17)

Postmodern thought embraces the idea that meaning is always shifting because a person's ideas are conditioned by her/his lifetime experience of representation and embeddedness in certain cultures, ideologies and interpretive communities. In this view it would be naive to imagine that the artist invents new forms or is able to control a work's meaning. Postmodern ideas of infinite recombination and citation were embraced by artists in the early 1980's and used in work that recycled images and materials from seemingly incompatible systems of representation. Cases in point are Julian Schnabel's panel paintings on which he combines images, quotes, photographs and religious icons on surfaces patched together from diverse materials including animal skin, rugs, posters, driftwood and broken crockery (Fig. 29). Christopher Reed described these works as ...

... conventional forms of authoritative ideology (religion, art history, medicine), yet their ultimate effect denies the viewer any certainty about their meaning... Schnabel's works seem desperate to communicate something, but that something is never clear; their mismatched signifiers force the viewer to confront the process of meaning-making itself. (Reed 1994, p.273)

Artists as diverse as Burgin and Schnabel challenge viewers to evaluate how representation functions and how they, under the influence of a media-dominated society, construct meaning. In this vein, Rosalyn Deutsche argued that the image itself is now treated “as a social relationship and the viewer as a subject constructed by the very object from which it formerly claimed detachment”, respectively that it becomes important to turn viewers’ “attention away from the image and back on themselves – or, more precisely, on their relationship with the image” (Deutsche 1998, p.296). Using Cindy Sherman’s staged film stills (Fig. 30)³⁶ as an example, Deutsche explained:

Sherman explored these characters not as reproductions of real identities but as effects produced by such visual signifiers as framing, lighting, distance, focus, and camera angle. In this way she drew attention to the material process of identity formation that takes place in culturally coded but seemingly natural images of women. Sherman's photographs both elicit and frustrate the viewer's search for an inner, hidden truth of a character to which the viewer might penetrate, an essential identity around which the meaning of the image might reach closure.

(Deutsche 1998, p.298/299)

Focusing the viewer’s attention on meaning-making itself – in this case regarding how female stereotypes are (re)produced by the film and advertising industries – Sherman *negates* social norms. Clichés of femininity are exposed but it is left, as in the work of Degas, to the viewer to evaluate them and to invent her/his own story. Sherman further enhanced this appeal by leaving the film stills untitled.

The intellectual position of questioning meaning-making itself entails a fundamental doubt as to the possibility of meaning as something definable by the artist or any authority. However, it may also be understood as the very call

³⁶ The series *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–1980) consists of 69 black-and-white self-portrait photographs on which Sherman poses in various female character types as they are disseminated by mass-media images.

to make meaning in a provisional and personal way. A corresponding pedagogical function was formulated by Eco as follows:

[T]he new perception of things, and the new way of relating them to each other, promoted by art might eventually lead us to understand our situation not by imposing on it a univocal order expressive of an obsolete conception of the world but rather by elaborating models leading to a number of mutually complementary results. (Eco 1989, p.150 [1962])

This statement may be taken as the maxim of what became known as relational art in the 1990s.

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Fig. 29: Julian Schnabel, untitled (two parts), 1983, oil, crockery, bondo on wood, 275 x 245 x 25 cm.

Private collection. Reproduction: Dorotheum Vienna, auction catalogue November 25, 2009

Fig. 30: Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still #43, 1979, gelatine silver print, 19.2 x 24 cm.

Museum of Modern Art, New York. Reproduction: Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures

2.11 Relational Art

The concept of the Open Work has been challenged and expanded by a number of artists who emphasise the facilitation of human relations as the desired effect of their work. This objective goes back to artists like Kaprow, Oiticica, and Clark but it is commonly associated with art practices of the 1990s and 2000s.³⁷ Arguably, the most influential label for many of them has become '*relational aesthetics*', or '*relational art*'. Curator Nicolas Bourriaud, who coined

³⁷ Claire Bishop identified "socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, participatory, interventionist, research-based, or collaborative art" as practices comprising the "expanded field of relational practices" (Bishop 2006b, p.180).

the term, identified as a trend of the 1990s that “*the artist sets his sights more and more clearly on the relations that his work will create among his public, and on the invention of models of sociability*” (Bourriaud 2002 [1998], p.28).



Fig. 31: Carsten Höller, *Test Site*, usable slide installation; commissioned by: *The Unilever Series / Tate Modern, London* (October 2006 – April 2007).

Photo: Craig Morey / Public Domain (CC BY-SA 2.0)



Fig. 32: Pierre Huyghe, *Chantier Barbès Rochechouart*, 1994 billboard, Paris, 300 x 400 cm. Offset printed poster (1996), 80 x 120 cm.

Courtesy of the artist. Licensed by Bildrecht, Vienna, 2013 (©)

Among Bourriaud’s examples are gallery-based works like Carsten Höller’s usable sculptures (Fig. 31) and Rirkrit Tiravanija’s cooking sessions (Fig. 33), as well as public interventions like Pierre Huyghe’s photo of construction workers exhibited as a billboard overlooking the site where it was taken (Fig. 32)³⁸ Another example is Alix Lambert’s 1992 *‘Wedding Piece’*, a project consisting in the artist getting married to and divorced from, three men and one woman within six months. Relational works complicate their interpretation in terms of formalism, symbolic content and artistic intentions; instead the viewer finds her/himself in the role of a “*witness, associate, customer, guest, co-producer, and protagonist*” (Bourriaud 2002 [1998], p.58).

At face value, relational art – taking “*as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space*” (Bourriaud 2002, p.14 [1998]) – seems to be opposed to the meaning-making of contemplative one-to-one

³⁸ In the 1994 work entitled *Chantier Barbès-Rochechouart*, “Huyghe offers an image of labor in real time: the activity of a group of workers on a construction site is seldom documented, and the representation here doubles or dubs it the way live commentary would” (Bourriaud 2005 [2001], p.17).

encounters between viewer and work.³⁹ However, the identification of Bourriaud's conception as promoting merely '*conviviality*' and '*sociability*' (claimed, for example, by Bishop 2004; 2005; Rancière 2009) is unduly reductive. It is true that people may have been inspired by Huyghe's billboard to discuss the situation *in situ*, and Lambert's '*Wedding Piece*' had an impact through the marriage-divorce procedures on the people directly involved. However, it is questionable whether such works do not unfold their main potential – "*to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real*" (Bourriaud 2002 [1998], p.13) – by their subsequent preparation as exhibitions where they proffer occasions for individual reflection.⁴⁰ Even the most explicitly '*sociable*' examples of relational art comprise crucial components of individual meaning-making, as Bourriaud's description of Tiravanija's cooking events indicates:

The meaning of the exhibition is constituted by the use its "population" makes of it, just as a recipe takes on meaning when a tangible reality is formed: spaces meant for the performance of everyday functions (playing music, eating, resting, reading, talking) become artworks, objects. The visitor at an exhibition by Tiravanija is thus faced with the process that constitutes the meaning of his or her own life, through a parallel (and similar) process that constitutes the meaning of the work. (Bourriaud 2005 [2001], p.47/48)

The artist involves his audience in the cooking and eating of meals "*like a movie director*" (Bourriaud 2005, p.48 [2001]). Tiravanija said that he tries to deprive the audience of its "*usual approach by setting up a different situation*" but eventually "*the situation can be defined through the context of art*"; in other words, the framing as art suggests that the experience should be thought about: "*I want people to leave thinking that they must reposition themselves in relation to what is being dealt with*" (Tiravanija & Barak 1996, p.3,1,3). Such '*repositioning*' implies not only individual reflection but also the momentum of utility Bourriaud referred to in his description of Tiravanija's work. In distinguishing relational art from earlier practices with similar agendas he elaborated:

³⁹ See: chapter one, note 23.

⁴⁰ Lambert's exhibition included, among other items, wedding photos and certificates, divorce documents, presents, and videos of the ceremonies (Bourriaud 2002 [1998], p.34).

Minimalism addressed the question of the viewer's participation in phenomenological terms. The art of the '90s addresses it in terms of use. Tiravanija once quoted this sentence from Wittgenstein: 'Don't look for the meaning of things, look for their use.

(Bourriaud & Simpson 2001, p.47)⁴¹

Although posed as an opposition, the process of 'looking for use' is itself an act of meaning-making as Bourriaud goes on to corroborate: "One is not in front of an object anymore but included in the process of its construction" (Bourriaud & Simpson 2001, p.47). This stance allows Bourriaud's concept of relational art to be seen from a pragmatic perspective.⁴² The founder of pragmatist art theory, John Dewey, posited a distinction ...



Fig. 33: Rirkrit Tiravanija, cooking event as part of the *Fear Eats the Soul* exhibition, 2011, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York.

Photo: Didier Leroi | www.vernissage.tv (©)

... between the art product (statue, painting or whatever), and the work of art. The first is physical and potential; the latter is active and experienced. It is what the product does, its working.

(Dewey 2005 [1934], p.168)

To shift the emphasis of 'work' in 'work of art' from noun to verb assumes a transactional activity of the viewer:

We are carried to a refreshed attitude toward the circumstances and exigencies of ordinary experience. The work, in the sense of working, of an object of art does not cease when the direct act of perception stops. It continues to operate in indirect channels.

(Dewey 2005 [1934], p.145)

⁴¹ Relational art is distinguished from historical avant-garde in that the former tends to focus on particular people, places, conditions, or social issues, whereas the latter subscribed to ideological projects that were much more general in scope.

⁴² The parallels between relational and pragmatist aesthetics, which Bourriaud neglects to discuss, were analysed by Smith (2005, chap.two).

In this vein, *meaning* (as *use*) begins with a self-rewarding experience and can eventually be defined, as argued in the next chapter, by the habits and conceptual changes it produces. Concurrently, Bourriaud suggests that an artwork's meaning lies in "*pointing to a desired world, which the beholder thus becomes capable of discussing, and based on which his own desire can rebound*" (Bourriaud 2002 [1998], p.23). Along these lines, relational art advances the concept of the Open Work. Eco's idea of multiple meanings is tied to the idea of a potential, "*as the inception of possible orders*" (Eco 1989 [1962], p.93); with Bourriaud it becomes a matter of '*hands-on utopias*' entailing an increase of people's ability to act in, or better understand aspects of, the world they inhabit.

The objective is given additional weight by Bourriaud's more recent argument that much of today's art is concerned with finding common denominators of different discourses, viewpoints and cultures – a "*new universalism*", which "*is based on translations, subtitling and generalised dubbing*" rather than continuing the post-structuralist legacy of discontinuity and fragmentation (Bourriaud 2009a, para.5). Openness is thus no longer bound to the idea of "*ever-changing profiles and possibilities in a single form*" (Eco 1989, p.74 [1962]). Artists tackle extant social, environmental, and/or cultural problems and challenge viewers to reconsider their viewpoints. In a review of the 2008 exhibition *Brave New Worlds*⁴³, which brought many such positions together, Christopher Atkins asked: "*[C]an we look with rather than at these works?*", and argued that "*looking in this way recruits us, as an audience, to participate within the articulation, exchange, and critique of these different worldviews*" (Atkins 2008, p.47). This approach suggests an 'opening of openness' to the personal negotiation of specific issues and the possibility of arriving at conceptual changes.

2.12 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that appealing to meaning-making has a long historical tradition, has been undertaken with various motivations and was achieved through various methods. One overriding motivation is summarised in Lser's concept of *negation*, which generally pertains to questioning social norms

⁴³ Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2007/08.

whilst abstaining from outright rejection. Examples discussed include confronting viewers with common preconceptions regarding stigmatised groups of people, policies and their own voyeurism, as well as questioning processes of meaning-making themselves.

To facilitate the viewer's attitude and readiness to '*contribute to the creative act*', artists have devised multifarious methods. A key strategy is the stimulation of an emotional response coupled with an appeal to reflection. This is a complex relationship that will be discussed in more detail in later chapters. Another key method is what Iser and Kemp called the employment of *blanks*. The blank – the unstated – is to be filled by the viewer's reflection and imagination. Many auxiliary devices like visually concealed details, narrative puzzles, and apparently unrelated titles constitute blanks. Specific methods to *refer the viewer back to her/himself (as viewer)* include letting characters gaze at the viewer, the use of mirrors, the choice of the venue and their engagement in a relational situation. Having traced a history of strategies used to invite the viewer's meaning-making in art practice, the next chapter will explore the concept of meaning-making from art theoretical, philosophical and psychological perspectives.

CHAPTER THREE: MEANING AND MEANING-MAKING

When something blows your mind, it can change the way you look at the world, and open it up to meditation and contemplation, and finally to being more aware. This is what an artwork can do; it creates a distance between the common place and the inner space, and lets people think by themselves.

Marie Sester, 2006¹

The fact that artists like Joseph Kosuth, Victor Burgin and Cindy Sherman, have focussed the prompt to make meaning on the processes of meaning-making itself – asking through their work what it actually means to make meaning – indicates that there is something at stake with the very concept of meaning. Having outlined the history of artists' interest in and methods used to engage the viewer in meaning-making, I will now consider the definition of meaning and meaning-making *per se*.

Debates on the concept of meaning most often revolve around the idea that a given symbol, object, situation, or event either *does have meaning* or *does not have meaning*, or, that it can be *made meaningful* through interpretation. Classic examples of meaningful entities are signs, symbols and words, the latter being variously considered a subcategory of either of the former. The word *house* (the '*signifier*'), for example, signifies (or *means*) a distinct class of buildings (the '*signified*'). For a person to think of 🌐 as opposed to something like 🏠, would be contentious in this model. When one's aim is to communicate a certain meaning the challenge is to use the most appropriate signifiers; for example, the term 'igloo' instead of 'house'. Whether the receiver understands the signified is a matter of education and mental ability.²

Linguist Charles K. Ogden and literary critic Ivor A. Richards criticised the assumption that every word or sign has a certain, *correct* meaning connected with it, referring to this as the '*proper meaning superstition*' (Ogden & Richards 1960 [1923]). By contrast, Ogden and Richards established that meaning resides in people rather than symbols (including words and texts). This raises

¹ Sester & Debatty (2006, para.12)

² For surveys of the topic see: Ogden and Richards (1960 [1923]), Speaks (2011).

questions regarding the fact that different people associate different ideas with the same symbols.³ Post-structuralist philosophers including Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, raised further doubts about the ability of verbal language (and images) to represent meaning. They argued that whenever one tries to define the meaning of something, one must recourse to contingent definitions that have been established against a backdrop of cultural and historical contexts and the rules of a given language (vocabulary, grammar, etc.) (Barthes 1989; Derrida 1977a; Foucault 1969). For example, the meaning of any word can only be stated through other words leading to an infinite deferral of meaning. When looking for the meaning of an artwork one will, as evidenced by Guérin's *'Return of Marcus Sextus'*, Jaar's *'Logo for America'* and other examples discussed in chapter two, necessarily make culturally and historically dependent assumptions. Meaning thus resides not only in individual people, but in contingent definitions, languages, and cultural conventions.

With regard to art, it seems particularly contentious to look for meaning. By "*asking what art means (to say)*", philosopher Jacques Derrida argued ...

... [one] submits the mark 'art' to a very determined regime of interpretation which has supervened in history: it consists, in its tautology without reserve, in interrogating the vouloir-dire of every work of so-called art, even if its form is not that of saying.

(Derrida 1987 [1978], p.22)

This is why questions such as *'What does the artist want to tell us?'* are problematic. However, both non-expert viewers and art world professionals alike pose such questions. Donald Preziosi criticised fellow art historians' frequent "*logocentric paradigm of signification*" and, despite different programmatic premises including iconographic analysis, Marxist social history, and (structuralist) visual semiotics, their shared concern with explaining "*how artworks mean*" (Preziosi 1991, p.16). Posing this question is akin to asking what art *represents*, which is to ask how artworks reflect social, cultural and historical issues. By contrast, postmodern philosophers have argued that art is essentially an assault on systems of representation, demanding that, through their openness and appeal to sensual reception it undermines systems of

³ Philosopher Emanuel Levinas established: "*To seize by inventory all the contexts of language and all possible positions of interlocutors is a senseless task. Every verbal signification lies at the confluence of countless semantic rivers*" (Levinas 2003 [1972], p.11/12).

conceptual representation. Jean-François Lyotard, for example, held that searching for ways “to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” is the key ethical capacity of art (Lyotard 1984 [1979], p.81). Already in 1946, artist Ad Reinhardt encapsulated a similar discontent with the dogma of representation in one of his cartoons, where a painting returns the viewer’s pretentious question (Fig. 34).

Despite his critique, Derrida saw positive aspects of verbal meaning-making. He suggested that works of art do not escape the system of language because they “cannot help but be caught within a network of differences and references that give them a textual structure” (Derrida et al. 1994, p.15).

Whereas Eco considered the interpretive instability of art’s symbolic meaning as a central emancipating virtue, Derrida regarded it as “infinitely authoritarian” (Derrida et al. 1994, p.13). The “silent” work with its “untouchable, monumental, inaccessible presence” can be controlled only through a discourse “that is going to relativize things, emancipate itself, refuse to kneel in front of the authority” (Derrida et al. 1994, p.13). Although in this view verbal language with all its constraints functions not as a corset but as a liberator of meaning, meaning nevertheless remains caught up in discourse. Whether meaning as something that can be put in words is an essential attribute of art remains questionable for Derrida.

One possible way to strengthen the notion of meaning in the realm of art would be to deny its strict ties with language. A brief look at Ogden and Richard’s summary of the ‘meaning of meaning’ (reproduced on p.8) of this thesis) indicates that the concept may be understood as exceeding the linguistic realm. An alternative view was presented by Pragmatist philosophers when they argued that meaning resides first and foremost in bodily experience – ‘beneath interpretation’ (Shusterman 1990; Shusterman 2000, chap.five) – and thus precedes all expression in language. In the pragmatist view, for anything to have meaning it must relate to human needs, longings, or fears. Mark Johnson

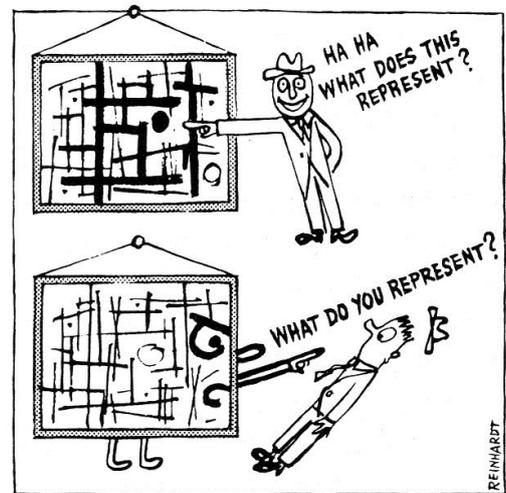


Fig. 34: Ad Reinhardt, *What Do You Represent?* (from the series *How to Look at Modern Art in America*), cartoon published in *PM*, June 2, 1946

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pointed out that the three things babies need to master in order to function successfully are interaction with others, bodily motion, and the perception, manipulation and use of objects, which are ...

... at once bodily, affective, and social. They do not require language in any full-blown sense, and yet they are the very means for making meaning and for encountering anything that can be understood and made sense of. (Johnson 2008, p.36)

This view upholds the primacy of experience for meaning-making, and this is not limited to infancy.⁴ It is biologically rooted in our desire for well-being, survival and the physical interaction with our environment. This may appear as the substitution of one confining structure (language) with another (body), but pragmatists emphasise that experiences are phenomenologically unique and rooted in the individual person's "*characteristics of temperament*" and "*special manner of vision*" (Dewey 2005, p.299 [1934]). Also, Pragmatism does not deny the importance of language. Like Derrida, John Dewey argued that words are "*practical devices*" as they are "*the agencies by which the ineffable diversity of natural existence as it operates in human experience is reduced to orders, ranks, and classes that can be managed*" (Dewey 2005, p.244 [1934]). As such, language is an essential tool for orientation and meaning-making but it is not the *primary* locus of meaning.⁵ In the pragmatist view, art-related meaning-making concerns bodily experience as well as the analytic mind. According to Richard Shusterman the role of art is to give "*a satisfyingly integrated expression to both our bodily and intellectual dimensions*" and he added that the sensed "*is without meaning if de-contextualized from the intellectual and vice versa*" (Shusterman 2000, p.7).⁶ This view will serve as a point of departure when investigating ways of *making* meaning in language while acknowledging the experiential factor.

⁴ Philosopher Crispin Sartwell gave an example: "*Think seriously for a minute about what you do and what you experience in a day. Better, think about the richness contained in a single glance. Then think, first, about the impoverished character of any human sign system with regard to the content of any glance: how far we are from being able to describe it, how far we are from wanting to, how far we are from needing to*" (Sartwell 2000, p.44).

⁵ For a summary and defence of the pragmatist view of meaning, see: Morse (2008). My references to Sartwell and Johnson are owed to his account.

⁶ Compare: Parsons' (2002) similar view, see 6.2.3.

Dmitry Leontiev argued that in psychology and the humanities there are only two generally accepted properties to characterise extra-linguistic meaning:

(a) a meaning of an object, event or action exists only within a definite context; in different contexts the same object has different meanings, and (b) meaning always points to some intention, goal, reason, necessity, including desired or supposed consequences, or instrumental utility.

(Leontiev 2005, p.2)

When applied to the interpretation of art, this may be taken to imply that it is the task of the viewer to investigate as thoroughly as possible what the artist's meaning (intention) was when the work was created. Indeed this is an approach many viewers take to art (see 3.6.1), and it is supported by the philosophical doctrine of '*Intentionalism*'.⁷ Intentionalists aim first and foremost to elucidate the artist's 'message' and how s/he made her/his choices in the (socio-historical) context of the work's production. This approach is largely (although not entirely) inadequate to a theory of meaning-making because it neglects that intentions also reside in the viewer, and that these intentions may or may not converge with those of the artist. The viewer brings to the work her/his *own context*, not only intellectually but also as s/he undergoes an emotional response. It will be argued that both are closely intertwined with the personal system of values that guide the construction of personal meaning.

3.1 Meaning and Intention

According to art historian Richard Wollheim, artistic intention can be defined as the "*desires, thoughts, beliefs, experiences, emotions*" and "*commitments, which cause the artist to paint [or otherwise create] as he does*" (Wollheim 1987, p.19).⁸ Intentionalism is commonly justified by the conviction that, just as we aim to interpret the intentions of the deeds and words of others in everyday life, we aim to interpret an artist's intentions when viewing artworks. Artworks are seen as solutions to problems and appreciating these solutions must involve

⁷ The debate originates in literature criticism but carries across to visual art. For intentionalist positions, see: Wollheim (1980; 1987), Hirsch (1967; 1976), Knapp & Michaels (1982), Irwin (1999), Pignocchi (2012).

⁸ A similar definition was provided by William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley who described intention as "*design or plan in the author's mind*" and having "*obvious affinities for the author's attitude toward his work, the way he felt, what made him write*" (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946, p.469).

appreciating the artist's agency. This view neglects that works of art, like objects, situations or actions in general, proffer meanings to a viewer during and after apprehension that are unpredictable and sometimes unwarranted. Such meaning-making can involve selecting, transforming, or generating (emotional) associations, or a behavioural dimension by "*energizing, blocking, or directing*" an activity (Leontiev 2005, p.6). What follows is that intentions underlying the production of an artwork and the production of meaning might widely diverge, and whether artistic intention (as a work's meaning) should be prioritised over more private apprehensions is debatable.

Related doubts are endorsed by many artists, although a complete subjectivism (which would be an equally debatable inversion of the argument) is seldom claimed. When asked in a panel discussion how important the viewer's understanding of his intentions is, artist Pavel Büchler responded:

My intention as an artist is totally irrelevant to you as a viewer... I have to have enough trust in what I do to somehow rely, or at least hope for, the capacity of the work to act as a focus for the production of meaning in the encounter with the audience ...

(Renton et al. 2010, 1:11:22h)⁹

The second part of the statement puts the first into perspective. Many opponents of a strict intentionalism do not altogether reject the idea that intentions are relevant to interpretation, but disagree regarding their pertinence and the importance of consulting artist statements in order to reveal such intentions.¹⁰

A formalist critique of intentionalism by literature scholar William K. Wimsatt and philosopher Monroe Beardsley (1946; also Dickie & Wilson 1995) holds that artists are simply unsuccessful if they do not manage to make their intentions intelligible through the work: "*How is he [the interpreter] to find out what the poet tried to do?*", they asked and gave an astute answer:

⁹ Artist Pavel Althamer responded similarly to a related question: "*Up to you! It doesn't matter what I want to do. It's up to you ... That's the message*" (Althamer & La Republica 2013, 0:29min).

¹⁰ This controversy evolves around versions of '*actual*' and '*hypothetical*' intentionalism. The former holds that direct pronouncements of intention by an artist are an admissible source for the interpreter, which the latter excludes arguing that works of art have a degree of autonomy once they are released to the public and shouldn't require its maker to explain what they are about. Key contributions to this debate include, but are not limited to, Carroll (1995; 2000), Livingston (1998; 2007; 2010), Bevir (2000), Stecker (2006), Iseminger (1995; 1996), Levinson (1995; 2010), Nehamas (1981), Nathan (2006). For an overview, see Irvin (2006).

If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem – for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem. (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946, p.469)¹¹

The argument amounts to the idea that all necessary information should be retrievable from or at least be compatible with the work itself. According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, and in agreement with later arguments by post-structuralists and pragmatists, such claims extend far beyond the context of the work's production:¹² “[T]he history of words after a poem is written may contribute meanings which if relevant to the original pattern should not be ruled out by a scruple about intention” (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946, p.488). In other words, the meaning of artworks is allowed to change over time.

Amongst the dangers that an interpreter who ‘goes outside the poem’ faces are that artists can fail to put their intentions into words, lie about them, change their own interpretation throughout their lives, may not be clear about what they intend to ‘say’ or be reluctant to comment. Tino Sehgal, for example, declared that:

I think artists’ intentions – I’m not sure that’s so relevant. They are important to generate the piece but then I just don’t feel that I am the authority to speak about it any more... (Sehgal & Thatcher 2012, p.1)

His interviewer Jennifer Thatcher added:

He asks me not to transcribe the interview as a straight [question and answer], anxious that once an artist has expressed their [sic] thoughts on a work it becomes impossible to interpret it in any other way. (Sehgal & Thatcher 2012, p.1)

Partly owed to such uncertainties, but going beyond the formalist retention of an intelligibility linked to the proper employment of signifiers and the assumption of

¹¹ A similar view was also defended by Dewey (1934, chap. 13).

¹² Derrida stated: “To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a kind of machine that is in turn productive, that my future disappearance in principle will not prevent from functioning and from yielding, and yielding itself to, reading and rewriting” (Derrida 1977b [1971], p.8). Richard Shusterman argued that “our most established and respected practices of literary interpretation” aim “at connectively constituting a greater wealth of meaningful features into a more coherent whole, a coherent understanding which exceeds the limits of the work itself and which can indeed be constructed on the inconsistencies of the work and its interpretive aporia by explaining and placing them in a larger context” (Shusterman 2000, p.92).

a normative reader/viewer qualified to understand the 'evidence' provided,¹³ post-structuralist anti-intentionalists argue that searching for authorial intention is an altogether arbitrary enterprise. Philosophers like Roland Barthes (1967), Jacques Derrida (1993 [1966]; 1987 [1978]), and Michel Foucault (2008 [1969]) posit that the alleged single self-determining author (artist) as a person conscious and able to realise her/his (and only her/his) intentions, is an illusion and that no analysis whatsoever can reveal stable meaning.¹⁴ In this view, not only the confinements of language but also ideological, social and cultural forces, the subconscious and conventions of artistic genres 'speak through' artists without them being fully aware and in command of them.¹⁵ Barthes argued that no text has ...

... a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original...

(Barthes 1967, n.p.)

With this '*death of the author*' and '*birth of the reader*', post-structuralist philosophers along with reader-response theorists (Iser 1994 [1976]; Holland 1975; Fish 1982) renounced the possibility that any final, let alone determinable, meaning can be encoded in texts or artworks. This does not jettison that artworks emerge out of specific situations and it is neither impossible nor appropriate for a viewer to ignore them completely. Eco clarified that openness is ultimately constrained by "*communicative conventions as cultural phenomena*"; a "*critical act*" is demanded, by which the viewer is to determine "*whether and to what extent the 'openness' of a particular work to various readings is the result of an intentional organization of its field of possibilities*"

¹³ Philosopher Jerrold Levinson summarised the notion of the '*appropriate reader*' as one "*versed in and cognizant of the tradition out of which the work arises, acquainted with the rest of the author's oeuvre, and perhaps familiar as well with the author's public literary and intellectual or persona*" and as being competent in the language employed and having "*knowledge of the references and allusions embedded in the text, and so on*" (Levinson 1996, p.183,184).

¹⁴ Michael Foucault recouped the author to a certain extent, describing her/him from the recipient's point of view as the result of "*a complex operation which constructs a certain rational being which we call 'author'*" (Foucault 2008 [1969], p.287). However, he viewed the search for authorial intentions as an, although creative, ultimately unsatisfiable process that makes the author an object of '*free manipulation*' (see 4.3.1, p. 110).

¹⁵ Against this exclusion, cognitive scientist and art theorist Alessandro Pignocchi argued that unconscious mental states also qualify as intentions because what spectators care about are all mental states that "*had a causal influence, through the actions and the decisions of the artist, on the appearance of the artwork. ... We are extremely permissive when we detect intentions behind the properties of a work: many intentions that we attribute to the artist are invented or, at least, projected*" (Pignocchi 2012, p.4).

(Eco 1989, p.115,100 [1962]). This does not reject the possibility viewers can create meaning autonomously, but it acknowledges the difference between responding to art and, for example, responding to faces one can spot in cloud shapes.

Viewers' presumption of a work being intentionally composed is what makes them consider it worthy of reflection, leaving them wanting to know more. Shusterman expanded on this, claiming that such prior understanding "*though it be inchoate, vague, and corrigible*" not only motivates but guides interpretive processes:

[W]e form our interpretive hypotheses about the text (and accept or reject alternative interpretations) on the basis of what we already understand as properly belonging to the text rather than falsely foisted onto it.

(Shusterman 2000, p.130)

It makes a difference if a giraffe was stuffed for display in a natural history museum or for an art exhibition, or if a painting was made by a monkey or by an artist.¹⁶

No artist can foresee all potential contexts that will situate her/his work, but viewers can expect artists to at least envisage the contemporary audience well enough to anticipate how an artwork will be generally apprehended. Otherwise, no one including artists making artworks, could ever be made responsible for what they do. Only when the object of contemplation can "*be considered an act of communication*", as Eco said, is it more than "*an absurd dialogue between a signal that is, in fact, mere noise, and a reception that is nothing more than solipsistic ranting*" (Eco 1989, p.100 [1962]).¹⁷ This leaves us with the task of locating a definition of meaning between constitutive and retrievable intentions on the one hand, and openness to the viewer's interpretation on the other.

¹⁶ Hoaxers have repeatedly trained monkeys to paint and presented the results to critics. Of the famous case of 'Pierre Brassau' a neglected French artist (in fact a chimpanzee) whose paintings were exhibited at the *Gallerie Christinae* in Göteborg, Sweden in 1964 – a critic wrote: "*Pierre Brassau paints with powerful strokes, but also with clear determination. His brush strokes twist with furious fastidiousness. Pierre is an artist who performs with the delicacy of a ballet dancer*" (cited in: *Time* 1964, p.77).

¹⁷ Eco gave an example: "*If, after looking at Dubuffet's Materielogies – which are much like a road surface or other bare terrain in their attempt to reproduce the absolute freedom and unlimited suggestiveness of brute matter—somebody had told him that they bore a strong resemblance to Henri IV or Joan of Arc, the artist would probably have been so shocked that he would have questioned the sanity of the speaker*" (Eco 1989 [1962], p.99). In a similar vein, Gopnik argued: "*We want the knowledge and effects they [works of art] provide to be frangible, labile, and particular – not formless or infinitely elastic, but suited to a large range of purposes and contexts, and to repeated, and repeatedly fertile, viewing*" (Gopnik 2012, p.145).

Moderate versions of intentionalism endorse this intermediate position of meaning. Philosopher Paisley Livingston explained:

[K]nowledge of some, but not all intentions is necessary to some, but not all valuable interpretive insights because such intentions are sometimes constitutive of the work's features or content. Moderate intentionalism recognizes that the artist's intentions do not always constitute the work's meaning. The contention, rather, is that when intentions are compatible with the text, they can be constitutive of a work's implicit meanings.

(Livingston 1998, p.835)

The consequence of this approach is that if an artistic intention can (however precisely) be identified, meaning-making must *not contradict* this intention if it is to do the work justice.¹⁸ Idiosyncratic personal rules, habits and associations do not necessarily separate each artist from each viewer. Perhaps not meaning-making in general but meaning-making paying respect to the *work* cannot ignore that Friedl's 'Zoo Story' began with an Israeli bombing raid, or that the food on Shapiro's trays mimics the last meals of death row inmates. It must be expected that contemporary viewers of these works are familiar with these particular subjects.¹⁹

3.2 The Repertoire

An alternative to the disputed notion of '*intention*' is Wolfgang Iser's concept of '*repertoire*'. According to Iser, a literary artwork's repertoire exposes and puts up for debate social norms and conventions, references to previous works, and the whole culture out of which the work has emerged (Iser 1994 [1976], sec.three). Likewise, the understanding of many works of visual art depends on such backgrounds. However, for the present purpose a slight modification is reasonable. Instead of opening up the concept of repertoire by including 'the whole culture' out of which a work has emerged, I suggest to replace this notion by historical factors that need to be known (such as the Israel-Palestine conflict

¹⁸ For related arguments, see: Eco (1989 [1962]), Livingston (1998; 2007; 2010), Räsänen (1999), Barrett (2002).

¹⁹ Gadamer argued that we must trace the artwork "*out as we see it because we must construct it actively*"; every composition requires "*constant cooperative activity*" and "*it is precisely the identity of the work that invites us to this activity. The activity is not arbitrary, but directed, and all possible realizations are drawn into a specific schema.*" (Gadamer 1986 [1974], p.27; compare: chapter two, note 18)

in Friedl's *'Zoo Story'*). Doing so still complies with Iser's idea of a work's repertoire incorporating "*a specific external reality into the text, and so [offering] the reader a definite frame of reference*" ... "*along which the text is to be actualized*" (Iser 1994 [1976], pp.212,85). Once the claim to a repertoire is omitted, openness is reduced to arbitrariness of reception and the artist's relevance to the work's meaning is sacrificed.

The concept of repertoire accommodates the notion that the artist is often not the most reliable source to provide information about intentions, and highlights what Foucault (2008, p.229) calls the "*subject's' points of insertion, modes of functioning, and system of dependencies*" (Foucault 2008 [1969], p.292). The repertoire points beyond the intentions of the artist (as self-governed, autonomous originator) and towards social norms and cultural circumstances, but the term does not refer to these as guiding or even constituting the artist-subject (as Foucault might have foregrounded) but as being chosen and exposed by the artist. This involves an intentional moment but it does not impute or demand the pervasion of the chosen norms and circumstances by the artist.²⁰ It is important, as Iser emphasised, that the norms concerned must be "*sufficiently implicit to act as a background to offset their new significance*" and "*need to be organized in such a way that the reason for their selection can be conveyed to the reader*" (Iser 1994 [1976], pp.69,80). The repertoire provides the viewer with toeholds for fashioning new connections or seeing new possibilities within the work.²¹ To establish a repertoire requires that artists carefully consider both their media and the envisioned audience; however, further contextual factors such as curatorial devices may be needed to mediate a work's repertoire (see 4.3).

²⁰ Artists must expect to be questioned on their competence to comment on certain subject matters. In my view painter Fernando Botero's qualifications, for example, to portray the atrocities in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, which he only knew from commonly available photographs, is therefore questionable (see: Botero's 2004/05 *Abu Ghraib* series).

²¹ In a similar vein Nicholas Bourriaud argued: "*[A]rt is an editing table that enables us to realize alternative, temporary versions of reality with the same material (basically, everyday life). Thus, artists manipulate social forms, reorganize them and incorporate them in original scenarios, deconstructing the script on which the illusory legitimacy of those scenarios was grounded. The artist de-programs in order to re-program, suggesting that there are other possible usages for techniques, tools and spaces at our disposition*" (Bourriaud & Ryan 2009, para.17).

3.3 'Meaning of' and 'Meaning to'

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'meaning' as: "The significance, purpose, underlying truth, etc., of something"²². Linked to the definition of 'making' as: "To bring into existence by construction or elaboration"²³, meaning-making boils down to 'constructing or elaborating significance, purpose, or underlying truth'. 'Making significance', amounts to a tautology as the term is commonly used as a synonym of meaning.²⁴ If an artwork *has* an *underlying truth* (as discussed, a questionable notion), this truth is necessarily pre-established (by the artist, respectively the context that 'speaks through' the artist) and cannot be *made* by the viewer. However, as far as the repertoire's relevance is concerned, this notion retains a certain justification (see 3.6.1).

The remaining interpretation of meaning-making as a 'construction' or 'elaboration' of a 'purpose', reflects the pragmatic perspective that was identified already in Bourriaud's concept of relational art in 2.11. One of the founders of Pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce, argued in this vein:

The whole function of thought is to produce habits of action ... To develop its meaning, we have, therefore, simply to determine what habits it produces, for what a thing means is simply what habits it involves.

(Peirce 1878, p.292)

If 'habit' is taken to include all kinds of activities that have become relatively automatic or characteristic for a person, including consistent patterns of thought and attitudes (Peirce 1899; Bergman 2012), the pragmatic view is in line with Nattiez' idea that objects take on meaning for a person when s/he places them in relation to her/his lived experience (see 1.4.1). Above all, making new meaning means to question one's existing concepts and attitudes. This is what

²² 'meaning, n.'. The Oxford English Dictionary (2001).

²³ 'make, v.'. The Oxford English Dictionary (2001).

²⁴ An alternative terminology was suggested by literary critic Eric D. Hirsch (1967 [revised 1984]). Hirsch distinguished between 'meaning' (authorial intention; 'fixed and immutable') and 'significance' (what a text is to the reader; 'open to change'). This view affirms the impossibility to *make* meaning for the reader (viewer) but it introduces a derivate concept instead. To follow Hirsch is problematic. He assumed that grasping the artist's intention to be the ultimate goal of interpretation and significance to be completely dependent on it: "Meaning, then, may be conceived as a self-identical schema whose boundaries are determined by an originating speech event, while significance may be conceived as a relationship drawn between that self-identical meaning and something, anything, else" (Hirsch 1984, p.204). Hirsch pointed to an ambivalence of the term meaning but the gains of replacing it in some instances by significance are limited. Hirsch's arbitrary re-definition of what usually counts as a synonym of meaning would have to be given much greater autonomy than Hirsch desires to be useful to this thesis.

philosopher Gilles Deleuze advanced when he advised to treat familiar concepts as objects ‘of an encounter’ and as ‘a here-and-now’ ...

... from which emerge inexhaustibly ever new, differently distributed ‘heres’ and ‘nows’... I make, remake and unmake my concepts along a moving horizon, from an always decentered center, from an always displaced periphery which repeats and differentiates them. (Deleuze 1995 [1968], p.xx/xxi)

Although Deleuze did not consider such conceptual changes germane to art apprehension, his account effectively describes the objective of meaning-making. Artworks can inspire processes like those Deleuze refers to, they can challenge us to re-consider our concepts of, and attitudes towards the world. This pragmatic notion shifts the focus from ‘meaning of’ (an artwork) to its ‘meaning to or for’ (the viewer), and enforces the epistemic position as a first person perspective implying a value judgement. The Oxford English Dictionary defines meaning in this sense as “a source of benefit or as an object of regard, affection, or love; to matter (a lot, nothing, etc.)”²⁵. The following discussion presents examples for the construction or elaboration of personal *purpose* that is rooted in changes of thought or attitude, or in preparing the ground for such changes.

In her blog, a viewer of Wangechi Mutu’s installation ‘*Try Dismantling the Little Empire Inside of You*’ (2007)²⁶ (Fig. 35) described her response to the work as follows:

... I feel that this piece was particularly meaningful to me because as a feminist woman, I feel the same internal struggle of contemporary beauty standards and what I should and should not be doing as an independent woman ... (Fortner 2007, para.6)

‘Meaning to’ in this example relates to having found an object of identification and confirmation. In a narrower sense, meaning is not ‘*constructed*’ or ‘*elaborated*’ (understanding these terms to imply some deliberate activity) but rather discovered or ‘coming upon’ the viewer. A somewhat different approach was taken by a viewer describing his response to a series of paintings by Jennifer Louise Martin (Fig. 36):

²⁵ ‘mean, v. trans.’. The Oxford English Dictionary (2001).

²⁶ Seen at the exhibition ‘*Global Feminisms*’, The Brooklyn Museum, New York, 2007.

Martin[’s] ... paintings of women who appear to be crying and ruining their makeup ... made me imagine an alternative universe in which instead of getting broken up with, I break up with each of my ex girlfriends. I cannot over emphasize how satisfying that is. (Watson 2012, para.5)²⁷

Although the statement is somewhat tongue in cheek, the constructed meaning of the artwork (*‘women who appear to be crying and ruining their makeup’*) is made meaningful to the viewer through his constructive imagination of an *‘alternative universe’*. However, whether this alternative universe produces habitual/conceptual changes or rather remains a volatile fantasy remains questionable. To substantiate the notion of self-generated meaning, more pertinent examples are discussed in the following sections. What these two testimonials do indicate is that a work’s acquisition of ‘meaning to’ a viewer entails an emotional element; an important feature that requires more attention. Also calling for further discussion is the understanding of ‘making’ as a deliberate activity. Whatever defines this process of *‘constructing’* or *‘elaborating’* constitutes participation on the basis of reflection.



Fig. 35: Wangechi Mutu, Try Dismantling the Little Empire Inside of You, 2007, Collage, ink, spray paint and mixed media on mylar, Diptych: 135.9 x 246.4 cm and 137.2 x 246.4 cm.

Courtesy of Susanne Vielmetter, Los Angeles and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York. Photo: Beckett Logan Collection of Deste Foundation, Athens, Greece (©)



Fig. 36: Jennifer Louise Martin, Beauty Is An Affliction I, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 240 cm.

Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Sylvain Deleu. (©)

²⁷ Seen at the exhibition *‘The New Curiosity Shop!’*, Londonewcastle Project Space, London, 2012.

3.4 Meaning, Affect, and Existential Themes

The notion of ‘meaning to’ as a source of benefit (or at least the anticipation thereof) entails not only a pragmatic, but also an affective side. Meaning in this sense does not require verbal interpretations but may manifest in various habitual, and potentially ineffable changes and emotional responses. The following example fleshes out potentially non-verbal, ‘*lived experience*’ aspects of meaning.



Fig. 37: Louise Bourgeois, *Altered States*, 1992, gouache, ink, ball pen, and pencil on paper, 48.2 x 60.3 cm.

Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Licensed by Bildrecht, Wien, 2013 (©)



Fig. 38: Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison*, 1994, white marble, 12 x 24.5 x 7.6 cm.

Collection of the artist; The Estate of Louise Bourgeois (©). Photo: Christopher Burke, © The Easton Foundation. Licensed by Bildrecht, Vienna, 2013 (©)

In a conference speech, sociology PhD student Paula McCloskey described her experience with several works by Louise Bourgeois (Figs. 37, 38)²⁸ as especially relating to various aspects of (her) maternity:

I was moved by how the form translated an energy to me, an emotion with which I could connect. I found the images sinister in many ways, but also strong, bold, questioning, defiant. The affective nature of this event, as being part of a trans-situational process, led to a sense of possibility, of something new, of something different. ... there was strangeness, an Otherness. However, there was some recognition; the images transmitted to me feelings of being trapped, as well as ambivalence, a feeling that I had experienced with my own maternity. The images allowed access to a

²⁸ Works referred to in the paper: The *Cells* series (for example ‘*Cell XVIII (Portrait)*’, 2000), various drawings (for example ‘*Altered States*’, 1992), the spider sculptures, and the series of pictures and sculptures of ‘*Femme Maison*’.

maternal part of me that was so hidden, so untouchable, that by this encounter-event I felt jolted.
(McCloskey 2010, p.1/2)

In another part of the text, the viewer explains that difficult maternity has been an existential theme in her life.²⁹ The pertinence of existential themes in art appreciation has been examined and theorised by psychologist Bjarne S. Funch (1997, pp.241–268; 2007). Funch explained that despite their being deeply embedded in a person’s psyche, emotions associated with existential experiences are usually much more complex and ineffable than those such as fear, joy, sadness, etc. When such emotions are only “*diffusely established in the psyche of the experiencing person or perhaps not constituted at all*”, they “*can only be actualized in new encounters that are similar to the first; they cannot be remembered and recalled*” (Funch 1997, p.248; 2007, p.10). In a similar vein, Dewey argued that it is a “*unique quality*” of art to clarify and concentrate “*meanings contained in scattered and weakened ways in the material of other experiences*” (Dewey 2005 [1934], p.87). There is a sense of recognition here but none of the sort at work when meaning is found in symbols, intentions, or the mere identification of depicted objects. Funch argued that in (emotional) recognition something can seem familiar even if it does not bring forth any memories (Funch 2007, p.9). Crude impressions and diffuse emotions can be very unsettling if they randomly intrude on the stream of consciousness (trauma would be an extreme example). Works of art can provide for the first time a distinct form for hitherto inaccessible emotions, and facilitate through their objectification “*a platform for better contact to present life*” (Funch 2007, p.13).

To discover an existential theme is an experience contingent upon a perfect match of the viewer’s personal life-experiences with a certain artistic utterance. However, they are not entirely accidental. Many grand themes of art – love, death, guilt, hope, transience, etc. – are existential ones. Their treatment by the individual artist may have a more or less profound impact on individual viewers but the recurring choice of these subjects indicates a universal pertinence. Moreover, different times raise different existential themes (alienation,

²⁹ McCloskey stated that her “*matrilineage bears witness to a history of ‘disrupted’ or ‘lost’ maternities*” and when having had a baby herself “*a combination of complex factors, events, and relationships collided*” shattered the confidence in herself as a mother in such a way that she decided her son would be cared for by someone else (McCloskey 2010, p.1).

ecological crises, etc.). In this vein, Funch pointed out that when “*current existential themes are objectified through works of art these objectifications make it possible for the audience to constitute and retain new emotional qualities*” (Funch 2007, p.17). With this type of emotional confirmation the work acquires ‘meaning to’ the viewer in that it has an immediate non-verbal impact. To speculate on McCloskey’s example this may have been a feeling of being understood for the first time, albeit by a strange entity: an artwork, an artist or a disembodied approval of her own way of feeling and responding to the world.³⁰

Not linguistically mediated, ameliorative meanings of art have been claimed by philosophers as well as scholars from other disciplines.³¹ McCloskey described Bourgeois’ work, using the terms of Deleuze and the psychoanalyst Felix Guattari, as a “*hospitable monument, with a ‘multiplicity of sensations’ which draw together a multiplicity of others (sensations, experiences, and so on)*” (McCloskey 2010, p.2). Deleuze called on Baruch Spinoza’s definition of ‘*affect*’ as a kind of sensation drawing together “*affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained*” (Deleuze 1988 [1970], p.49; also Deleuze & Guattari 1994 [1991]). The term ‘*affect*’, as used by Deleuze and Guattari, is more fundamental than ‘*feeling*’ or ‘*emotion*’. Philosopher Brian Massumi explained that it does not denote ...

... a personal feeling (sentiment in Deleuze and Guattari). *L’affect* (Spinoza’s *affectus*) is ... a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act. (Massumi 1987, p.xvi)

In this sense, *affect* always precedes and remains beyond consciousness; it can lead to feelings but also to motion, orientation behaviour, etc. The term denotes, as brain scientist Alvaro Pascual-Leone agrees, fundamental agitations of the organism that serve to ready it “*via the hormonal/endocrine and the muscular tonus/postural systems ... for oncoming expected kinds of experience*” (Pascual-Leone, p.304.³² According to Deleuze and Guattari, it is

³⁰ In this vein, philosopher Robert Sokolowski posited that paintings can “*present worlds in which something like us can be*” (Sokolowski 2005, p.346).

³¹ For example: Beardsley (1981), Shusterman (2000), Johnson (2008), Arnheim (1974), Joy & Sherry (2003), Di Benedetto (2007).

³² This definition is narrower than other common understandings of the term affect. Anthropologist and psychologist Paul Ekman, for example, regards affect rather as a superordinate concept comprising emotions, moods, character traits and other psycho-physiological phenomena (Ekman 1992, 1994).

the artist's mission to explore and make manifest new ways of perceiving and being affected;³³ artists create *affects* and *percepts*³⁴ in their work, then “give them to us and make us become with them” (Deleuze & Guattari 1994, p.175).

Philosopher Brian Massumi elaborated on the notion of affect and related it to the concept of meaning. “*Meaning encounters*” are a “*thinking-perceiving body*” (exemplified by a carpenter) that is moving “*out to its outer most edge, where it meets another body*” (a piece of wood) and which draws it ...

... into an interaction in the course of which it locks onto that body's affects (capacities for acting and being acted upon) and translates them into a form that is functional for it (qualities it can recall). A set of affects, a portion of the object's essential dynamism, is drawn in, transferred into the substance of the thinking-perceiving body. From there it enters new circuits of causality. (Massumi 1992, p.36)

Relating this notion to the encounter between artwork and viewer, artist and philosopher Simon O'Sullivan described it as:

[A] collision, between two fields of force, transitory but ultimately transformative ... The encounter, between participant and artwork, is as productive, albeit in a different sense, as that between artist and material. “Meaning” might then be thought as this productive “event”, this “moment” of meeting, ungraspable in its moment of occurrence, but real in its effects.
(O'Sullivan 2006, p.21)

On a similar but more therapeutic note, Beardsley argued that the experience of art can generate feelings of personal integrity, resolve lesser conflicts, develop imagination, refine perceptual discrimination, and improve the ability to empathise (Beardsley 1981 [1958], p.574). What Funch, O'Sullivan, and Beardsley's accounts suggest is a pragmatic, emotional, and potentially ineffable side of meaning.

³³ Deleuze and Guattari defined the work of art as a ‘*multiplicity* (or ‘*bloc*’) of sensations’ (percepts and affects). It is the only entity in which sensations endure: “*The young girl maintains the pose that she has had for five thousand years, a gesture that no longer depends on whoever made it. The air still has the turbulence, the gust of wind, the light that it had that day last year and it no longer depends on whoever was breathing it that morning*” (Deleuze & Guattari 1994 [1991], p.163).

³⁴ John Wylie summarised the two concepts as they pertain to visual qualities: “[*A*] *percept* is a style of visibility, of being-visible, a configuration of light and matter that exceeds, enters into, and ranges over the perceptions of a subject who sees. An *affect* is an intensity, a field perhaps of awe, irritation or serenity, which exceeds, enters into, and ranges over the sensations and emotions of a subject who feels” (Wylie 2005, p.236).

These evaluations of meaning outside the realm of verbal language are valid, revealing that there is more to this concept than many post-structuralist critics accounted for. However, related claims that bring meaning close to enabling a *'better contact to present life'*, influencing *'the body's power of acting'*, or appealing to *'powers in which man recognizes himself'* remain vague and somewhat esoteric. This does not compromise any benefits a person may gain from art apprehension independent from language, but, at least for heuristic reasons, verbal accounts such as McCloskey's remain very instructive:

My moving forward embroiled me in a process of thinking and doing. I had to re-evaluate and re-configure all that I had known and understood (or not understood) ... this encounter would ultimately destabilise this world. I started to read, write, and draw. (McCloskey 2010, p.4)

The statement suggests that putting apprehensions in words can be useful in bringing out crucial aspects of meaning. Although an artwork's 'meaning to' a viewer comprises germane emotional, pragmatic, and visual/imaginary elements, it is often reflective realisation that renders them fully effective. The following sections will further explore this assumption.

3.5 Meaning-Making

3.5.1 Meaning and Verbalisation

Psychological research has shown that emotional engagement is foundational to the construction of personal meaning in general, and specific studies of the relation between emotion and intellect in the apprehension of art confirms this observation.³⁵ A number of models have been suggested to describe the emotional-cognitive relation in art apprehension, variously emphasising that cognition is the basis of emotions or vice-versa.³⁶ Drawing together results from several psychological studies (Csikszentmihályi 1990; Carver 1996; Smith 1996), Matthew Pelowski and Fuminori Akiba concluded that unreflected encounters with art *"do not include a component of self-*

³⁵ For a general assessment, see: Sanbonmatsu & Kardes (1988), Greenberg & Pascual-Leone (1997), Dirkx (2001). For art-related investigations, see: Silvia (2005a; 2005b), Roald (2007), Hagdtvedt et al. (2008).

³⁶ For example: Leder et al. (2004); Hagdtvedt et al. (2008) draw attention to contributions by Cohen & Areni (1990), Berkowitz (1993), Forgas (1995), and Wyer et al. (1999).

modification and leave the viewer without any understanding of the significance of the preceding event" (Pelowski & Akiba 2011, p.92). It may be objected that the implied pertinence of '*understanding*' is contentious because '*significance*' (meaning) does not require to be *understood* and self-modification (meaning turning into effect) occurs already on emotional, practical and/or visual/imaginary levels. At least this is implied by the discussion in the previous section (also Shusterman 1990; 1999; Johnson 2008). Meaning can, as in the case of the Mutu-viewer, 'come upon' us – sometimes perhaps as a kind of *aha!*-experience (Lasher et al. 1983) – without our wilful constructive or elaborating activity. In such situations, however, we do not *make* the meaning. If the *making* is under observation, reflection is a component that cannot be neglected and verbalisation will often help to gain further insight regarding the '*preceding event*' and make it manageable.

McCloskey's account suggests that '*thinking*', '*re-evaluating*' and '*re-configuring*' eventually facilitated her habitual changes (her beginning to '*read, write, and draw*', etc.). "*The constitution of an individual emotional quality*", Funch noted, "*makes it possible to reflect on it, which in the long run is the fundamental basis for a personal ethic*" (Funch 1997, p.249). I would like to flesh out this passage from an emotionally to an intellectually (and, for that matter, ethically)³⁷ purposeful encounter through a personal memory.

As a student, I went to see an exhibition of photos by Clare Strand with a few friends. The photographer had girls in their early teens pose as the *Spice Girls* pop group (Fig. 39). On the way out, one of our group remarked casually that he had '*caught himself thinking that one or two of the girls looked almost sexy*'. He was then quick to explain that '*of course they were children*', and that '*he was no pervert*', and '*how amazing it is what an outfit and makeup could do*'.³⁸ If this student hit an existential theme of his, it would make a perfect example for Funch's theory: "*The individual emotional quality*" (some distraught but ultimately ineffable state) "*goes from being governed by outer forces*" (the

³⁷ I do not aim to make a contribution to debates on aesthetics in relation to ethics but it is noted, with Funch that self-realised '*emotional growth*' would present an interesting starting point for such a discussion. In a similar vein, O'Sullivan argued that art increases our capacity to act in the world and embodies a kind of '*ethicoaesthetics*', that is "*the organisation of productive encounters 'through' art*'. *These productive encounters themselves allow for the generation of 'common notions', understood simply as the concepts we form about the world when we experience the joy of two bodies that agree coming together*" (O'Sullivan 2006, p.42).

³⁸ To provoke a disquietingly erotic response to seductively dressed teenagers is not an uncommon artistic strategy. An example would be the exhibition '*Viva Lolita*', Maddox Arts Gallery, London, 2008. See also: Windsor (1998).

artist's composition of percepts and affects, in this case the effect of 'an outfit and makeup') "to something that is an integrated part of the psyche" (erotic attraction) "and becomes focused on a specific existential theme for the first time" (very young girls) (Funch 1997, p.248).

The scenario works as a thought experiment but ultimately seems excessive. A less existential yet meaningful encounter would be one accountable for in terms of Iser's notion of negation: the viewer showed "a productive response" as he turned his attention towards his own spontaneous emotional reaction that contradicted his "previous range of orientation" (Iser 1994 [1976], p.133). He was thereby enabled to "become aware of the inadequacy of the gestalten he has produced" and "detach himself from his own participation in the text", respectively "see himself being guided from without" (Iser 1994 [1976], p.133). In the example the viewer relegates the responsibility for his response to the girl's outfit and makeup (as staged by the photographer). Ultimately it was the reflective response – the viewer being turned back to himself as a subject shaped by instincts and social norms – that rendered the work potentially meaningful to this viewer.

In the existential scenario of McCloskey's reception of Bourgeois' work and the student's experience of Strand's *Spice Girls*, an initial emotional response took the place of a quest for intentions and yet both viewers responded in accordance with the works' repertoire. Louise Bourgeois declared: "A work of art doesn't have to be explained. If you do not have any feeling about this, I cannot explain it to you. If this doesn't touch you, I have failed" (Bourgeois 2001, 20:06min). In a different key, Strand's *Spice Girls* appeal to the viewer's emotional response – "insecure, vulnerable, feral and precociously jaded in their prematurely provocative yet unflattering poses", as observed by critic Ana Finel

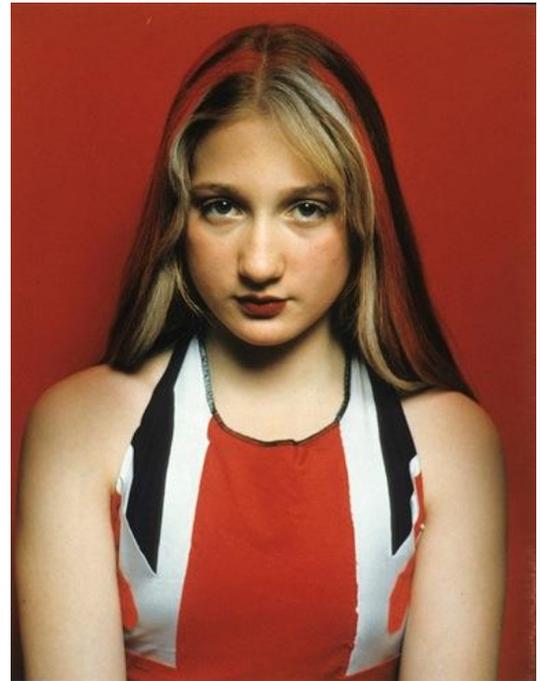


Fig. 39: Clare Strand, *Spice Girls: Ginger Spice - Charlotte Lane Aged 11 Years*, 1998, C41 print on aluminium, 101.6 x 76.2 cm.

Reproduction: Courtesy of the artist (©) and Royal College of Art, London

Honigman (2007, para.3). Yet the viewers have actively participated in the meaning-making through reflection on their emotional response and thus *made* the experience more purposeful; they elaborated the ‘meaning to’ them.

3.5.2 A Basic Schema of Meaning-Making

Although reflection and verbalisation are crucial features of meaning-making, it cannot be reduced to these activities. Meaning-making begins before the viewer starts to think about a work of art. As already argued, philosophers have hinted at the role of prejudices (or ‘*fore-meanings*’) and the embedding of any subject in social and linguistic contexts that determine an artwork’s reception. As noted in the introduction, audience studies suggest that museum visitors frequently use art to prove to themselves (and sometimes others) that they are competent to make sense of it. Psychologist Dorothee Halcour observed that art viewers often seek art’s “*vagueness (and the accompanying tension) ... in order to reduce it subsequently*” (Halcour 2002, p.67, my translation) – a process that other researchers have identified as ‘*cognitive mastery*’ (Leder et al. 2004).³⁹

Another scenario of the initial phase of meaning-making is that the artwork captures the viewer’s attention unexpectedly, or that the viewer’s intellectual approach is interrupted by an instinctive response such as a feeling of disgust or erotic stimulation. Research suggests that arousal experienced at a given point in time emphasises and polarises succeeding affective and evaluative responses (Hagdtvedt et al. 2008; Pham 2004; Reisenzein 1983). In the case of an ‘affective ambush’, the artwork’s initial meaning is determined by an intuitive evaluation as a phenomenon deserving further attention; it is primarily perceived as something potentially useful, pleasing, or dangerous.

In both cases – when viewers treat an artwork as a distinct intellectual challenge and when they respond instinctively to an ‘affective ambush’ – initial

³⁹ According to Helmut Leder, Benno Belke, Andries Oeberst & Dorothee Augustin, the aesthetic experience is “*a cognitive process accompanied by continuously upgrading affective states that vice versa are appraised, resulting in an (aesthetic) emotion*” (Leder et al. 2004, p.493). Psychologist Paul Silvia observed that evaluations of events, rather than the events themselves, cause the emotional experience. In this view, artworks may be said to affect emotions via their influence on appraisals (Silvia 2005a; 2005b). Silvia hints at the importance of the ‘*knowledge emotions*’ interest, confusion, and surprise (Silvia 2009; 2010). They, he argued, originate in people’s “*appraisals of what they know, what they expect to happen, and what they think they can learn and understand*” (Silvia 2009, p.49).

meaning is implicitly ascribed to the work in anticipation of the purpose it will *probably* have. Such meaning is necessarily potential in that the work bears a ‘promise of meaning’. Whether/how the artwork will *actually* become meaningful in the sense of fostering a habitual/conceptual change (*‘self-modification’*) has yet to be worked out by the viewer. Fig. 40 illustrates the process:

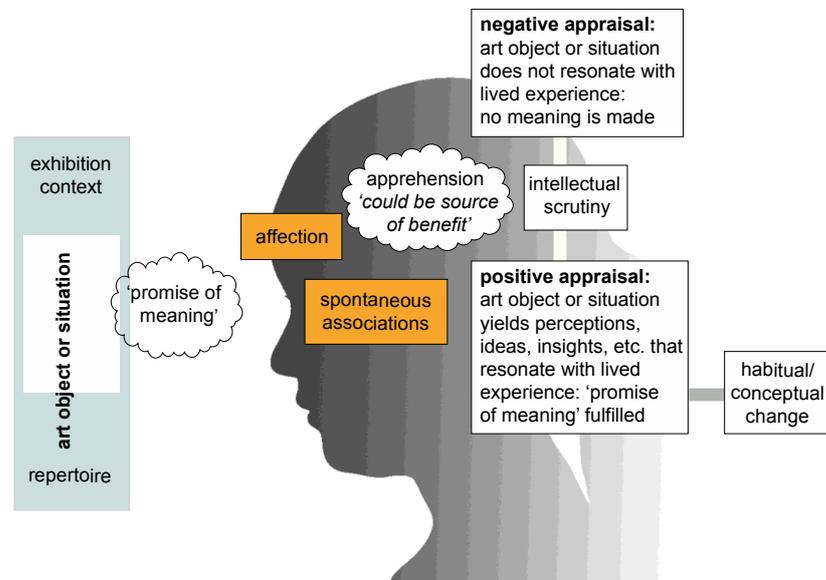


Fig. 40: Meaning-making – Basic Schema

We know that artworks are automatically associated with images and other sensual memories, emotions, or verbal knowledge (Fenner 2003; 2008). Whether further analysis takes place depends on whether these associations can be related to one’s personal interests. This does not necessarily involve conscious reflection. Dewey referred to a phase of *‘undergoing’* in experience but emphasised that this process is not impersonal or unrelated to reflection:

The organism brings with it through its own structure, native and acquired, forces that play a part in the interaction. The self acts as well as undergoes, and its undergoings are not impressions stamped upon an inert wax but depend upon the way the organism reacts and responds. ... The organism is a force, not a transparency. (Dewey 2005 [1934], p.56)

This *‘force’* is largely involuntary – however, *“adequate yielding of the self”* to the artwork requires also *“a controlled activity that may well be intense”*; *“[t]here is work done on the part of the percipient as there is on the part of the artist”* (Dewey 2005 [1934], pp.55,56). Thus the making of meaning involves

scrutinising *how* spontaneously evoked images, emotions, or verbal memories intersect with the viewer's general interests. One may be reminded of women who ruin their makeup, of issues surrounding maternity, or of teenage sex appeal, but one may find these themes of little personal interest. Conversely, finding an artwork *interesting* rather than just *pleasing*⁴⁰ prolongs the time spent on its apprehension. Prolonged viewing time increases the chances of making connections with one's own '*lived experience*', and thus of discovering personal relevance (Pelowski 2007; Lachapelle 2010).

It is conceivable that meaning to one's life can be elaborated or constructed outside verbal language. One might indeed improve one's cooking skills by participating in a Tiravanija work or train equilibrioception when balancing on Robert Morris' '*Bodyspacemotionthings*'⁴¹. What such exercises have in common with verbal meaning-making is the time component, or *yielding*. However, this type of meaning-making is often a corollary of conceptual frameworks and remains comparatively rare. Usually, the meaning-maker confronts the question: 'What is the work doing for me?' In response, existing assumptions can be enforced (as by the Mutu-viewer), revised (as by the Bourgeois-viewer) or at least challenged (as by the Martin- and the Strand-viewer). The 'meaning of' ('purpose of') the artwork eventually converges with the 'meaning to' (as apprehension of value) fulfilling the initially perceived promise of meaning.⁴²

3.6 Modes of Meaning-Making

The fact that different people interpret the same work of art in different ways is partially owed to different, but not mutually exclusive, interpretative '*logics*'. With reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein's '*language games*', Richard Shusterman referred to '*interpretive games*' and interpretation as a "*performed ability*" responding "*to the work of art in ways conforming to the range of culturally*

⁴⁰ Compare: Silvia (2006, chap.one)

⁴¹ '*Bodyspacemotionthings*' is collection of weights, beams, tunnels, platforms, ramps, and rollers, inviting the visitor to crawl, balance, climb and otherwise interact with. The installation was presented by the Tate gallery in London in 1971 and re-staged by the Tate Modern in 2009.

⁴² When Rancière cautions against artists (like Martha Rosler) and theorists (like Nicolas Bourriaud) who allegedly presume viewers to be passive by default and thus strive to '*activate*' them so that they would realise or take action against something that the artist finds worthy of critique, he trusts precisely in this individual motivation. Rancière is confident though that "*the very people that are supposed to be ignorant or passive spectators are able to reappropriate in their way the product of the strategies of the artist*" (Rancière 2010b, p.74).

appropriate response, ways already accepted or ways capable of winning acceptance” (Shusterman 2000, p.92). In the following, three types of meaning-making – meaning-retrieval, meaning-speculation, and meaning-separation – are distinguished.

3.6.1 Retrieval

Despite doubts about ‘true’ and fixable meaning, the desire to find and *retrieve* such meaning is still widespread. This is perhaps most understandable within art historical disciplines where artworks are often explained based on the context out of which they emerged. Retrieval also remains pivotal, however, to certain art *critics*. Intentionalists and formalists defend the necessity to find meaning in the motivation of the author, respectively the work’s compositional ‘code’. Even in hermeneutic theories of interpretation that emphasise the importance of viewer bias, the principle aim remains to reveal hidden truth.

Audience research confirms the general preference for meaning-retrieval among exhibition visitors. Art viewers in museums typically begin their explorations by trying to recognise works’ subject matter through their visual language and perceptible details (Wetzl-Fairchild 1991; Émond 2008). Subsequently, they often seek confirmation in the label: *“They want to know how close they actually come to the official description of the artwork they explore”* (Émond 2008, p.54; also Deeth 2012). Information provided by museums about the artwork and the artist is generally welcome (Émond 2006a; Carter-Birken 2008; Wood 2012). It has also been observed that viewers typically make initial value judgments based on recognition and personal preferences (Leder et al. 2004).⁴³ A further reaching ambition is, then, *“the correct placement of a work of art in terms of a period, school, style, or particular place within the artist’s oeuvre”* (Housen 1987, p.43).⁴⁴ Viewers go beyond this stage of classification when critical skills are brought into the service of feelings and intuitions (Housen 2007, p.175). This happens, for

⁴³ The observations of Émond and Leder et al. are supported by research of Parsons (1987), Housen (1987), Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990), Wetzl-Fairchild (1991), Van Moer (2007), Pelowski & Akiba (2011).

⁴⁴ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rick Robinson observed that the propensity to appreciate especially *“the organisation of the elements constituting the work”, “sleuth out secret messages hidden in the work”* as well as to *“place it within a historical, art historical, or biographical context”* are among the most frequently discussed aspects of art world professionals (Csikszentmihályi & Robinson 1990, pp.30,43,44).

example, when a work's metaphors are assessed, a move Leder and colleagues call *'cognitive mastering and evaluation'* (Leder et al. 2004).⁴⁵ Finally, viewers often enjoy *"general contemplations about art production, art criticism and the space in which artifacts are placed"* (Van Moer 2007, p.6).

In 'retrieval mode', meaning is located entirely outside oneself, where, Pelowski & Akiba argued, *"it can be received and assessed but is itself 'unchangeable'"* and *"leaves no opening for considering the role [of the viewer's own identity] in shaping information, or the role that artwork plays in questioning expectations"* (Pelowski & Akiba 2011, p.82). Given these constraints, retrieval qualifies as meaning-making only because symbols, metaphors, etc. are often not immediately transparent; they have to be worked out by the viewer in order to establish the work's repertoire. This involves *'adequate yielding'* and an activity of reasoning and choosing between different interpretative avenues. An artwork is made purposeful in retrieval mode alone only in so far as it can become a source of self-affirmative satisfaction to the viewer.

3.6.2 Speculation

Post-structuralist theory and reader response criticism emphasise the contingency of all interpretation. In this vein, Iser (similar to Eco; compare 6.2.1) argued that it is the interpreter's task to *"elucidate the potential meanings of a text, and not to restrict himself to just one"* even though *"the total potential can never be fulfilled in the reading process"* (Iser 1994 [1976], p.22). It is this impossibility that brings the relativity and subjectivity of meaning, as well as the *"factors that precondition the composition of the meaning"* to awareness (Iser 1994 [1976], p.22). A radical consequence of post-structuralist teachings and a position diametrically opposed to retrieval is to withhold any formulation of meaning; that is, to acknowledge art as something where words find their limit and *"resistance is mounted against the authority of discourse, against discursive hegemony"* (Derrida et al. 1994, p.13). Although corresponding attitudes have been observed in art viewers,⁴⁶ a more modest and arguably

⁴⁵ *"The results of the cognitive mastering stage are permanently evaluated in relation to their success in either revealing a satisfying understanding, successful cognitive mastering or expected changes in the level of ambiguity"* (Leder et al. 2004, p.499).

⁴⁶ Halcour argued that the conscious disavowal of explanation – to keep meaning *'floating'* – represents a rare, self-confident, intellectual attitude which consists in enjoying to maintain the tension of the unexplained (Halcour 2002). Halcour regards this attitude as often linked to self-

more frequent renouncement of fixed meaning in interpretative practice is a consciously biased, experimental and playful approach to meaning-making that may be identified as *speculation*. Andrea Weltzl-Fairchild drew attention to related interpretive activities ...

... in which the viewer is orienting herself in relation to the work of art and in which other solutions are being offered to a perceived problem, new links, usages, and elements are being made, or new insight may perhaps be gained. (Weltzl-Fairchild 1991, p.275)⁴⁷

Some audience studies have revealed that viewers occasionally interpret artworks as metaphors for aspects of their own lives.⁴⁸ To speculate about the meaning of an artwork is to seek feasible interpretations whilst accepting that there may be equally viable alternatives. The difference between retrieval and speculation is an attitudinal one: the retrieving viewer seeks an embedded truth whilst the speculating viewer is not concerned about 'missing the point'.

An example of speculative meaning-making is the following description by author Benjamin Weissman of his encounter with Christopher Wool's word paintings (Fig. 41):

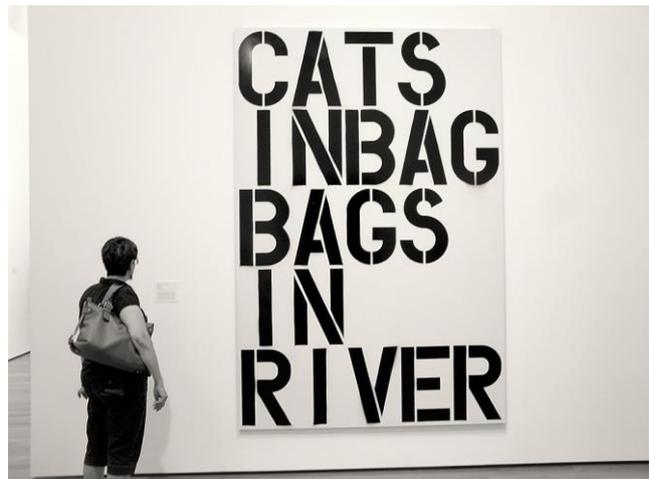


Fig. 41: Christopher Wool, Untitled, 1990, enamel on aluminium, 274,3 x 182,9 cm.

Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York. Photo: Tim McFarlane / Public Domain (CC BY-NC-ND)

esteem: “[D]oes it not speak for one’s own sophistication to deal with ultimately unanswerable questions?” (Halcout 2002, p.82, my translation). Another reason for suspending meaning may be that any commitment entails the chance to err. In this respect, Housen observed that some viewers acknowledge the work’s “*identity and value being subject to reinterpretation*” and mistrust their “*own processes, which are knowingly subject to chance and change*” (Housen 2007, p.175, see also Halcout 2002, p.340).

⁴⁷ This kind of response applies also describes to activities of meaning-making in separation mode.

⁴⁸ See: Weltzl-Fairchild (1991), Falk and Dierking (2000), Halcout (2002), Weltzl-Fairchild and Gumpert (2006), Van Moer (2007) and Rowold (2008).

[At first] I thought they were smug, flip, arrogant, simplistic; another art world gimmick straight from bogus island. ... Years passed, and the humorous ghosts inside Mr Wool's cryptic utterances suddenly made sense to me and turned me into an ardent admirer. I started to see the words as figuration, enlarging English letters to the size of a human torso, sometimes bigger. I understood them in terms of a body. So much dimension in their flatness. ... They made more and more sense. They also prefigure the broken syntax of text messaging by at least a decade.
(Weissman 2007, para.16,19)

Weissman's initial response to Wool's work revealed no 'meaning to' him at all. Later, the '*cryptic utterances suddenly made sense*'. A phase of undergoing (indicated by happening suddenly) blended with a phase of making, which led Weissman to liken Wool's paintings to '*the broken syntax of text messaging*' that he knew could not have been the artist's intention in 1990. A similar impression can be gleaned from the viewer of Mutu's '*Try Dismantling the Little Empire Inside of You*' (Fig. 37):

Embedded in the installation, the wall appears to have these jewel-like pearlescent forms, which may or may not have been intended to also be seen as acne.
(Fortner 2007, para.3)

or

To me, the monkey could represent the socially sanctioned media, where it gets to deem what sorts of things are attractive. (para.6)

Interpretations like these indicate an awareness of a personal bias without contradicting the work's repertoire. It is compatible with Eco's view that Open Works produce an especially intense pleasure because viewers enjoy scrutinizing them for clues and formulating tentative interpretations of the "*ever-changing profiles and possibilities in a single form*" (Eco 1989, p.74 [1962]). The purpose that viewers create for themselves in speculation mode is mainly a playful, entertaining one.

3.6.3 Separation

Attitudes of retrieval and speculation both look for signs and relations between these signs in the art object, which are then interpreted with or without reference to the artist's intentions. When Weiss referred Wool's work to *'the broken syntax of text messaging'*, he neither began to reflect on this topic (as far as we can tell) nor is this the work's subject matter. By contrast, in all other examples cited in this chapter, viewers seem at some point to disregard meaning related to formal qualities, symbols and intentions. Rather they focussed on a negotiation of (social) norms and their self-image and thus issues that the apprehended works are *about*. In other words, these viewers were more concerned with the *signified* than the *signifier*.

The search for meaning *separated* from object-features is more difficult to relate to certain philosophical positions than are *retrieval* and *speculation*. Rather it is found in the ideas of various, not necessarily related thinkers. Iser's idea of negation is akin to this approach as is to some degree Jacques Rancière's view that to experience works of art can have a political effect in dealing with its *"multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible"* (Rancière 2008, para.28). In a similar vein, Nicolas Bourriaud demanded an art that *"enables us to realize alternative, temporary versions of reality"* (Bourriaud & Ryan 2009, para.17). Also related is Michael Parsons' view that it is the highest level of art appreciation when the viewer confronts questions regarding human values more generally as opposed to merely contemplating aesthetic issues (Parsons 1987, p.151).

Despite the negative empirical evaluation of viewers' endorsement of their role as meaning-makers, separative meaning-making has been recognised. Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi and Rick Robinson note that in their study, artists' intentions were sometimes *"bypassed"* by viewers who saw the art *"as a vehicle for stimulating fantasy and imagination"* or by reflections *"upon themselves as viewers"*, and subsequently reported a heightened awareness of themselves (Csíkszentmihályi & Robinson 1990, p.66). From these observations, they concluded that *"art can become a means of questioning (oneself) and (one's) surroundings in order to obtain a greater understanding of different values"*

(Csíksszentmihályi & Robinson 1990, p.67). The Martin-, the Bourgeois-, and the Strand-viewer's examples support this observation.

Another type of response in line with Csíksszentmihályi & Robinson's conclusion focuses on more general, 'political', values. The following viewer's comment on Maria Fernanda Cardoso's sculptures of tiny animal genitals (including those of insects) (Fig. 42) provides an example:

They are absolutely incredible structures and it makes you wonder why on Earth nature created such weird and unique shapes for different creatures to ultimately do the same thing, that is, reproduce. This type of art is so conducive to getting the audience to look at their world in a whole new way and ponder upon what other little microcosms (or big macrocosms) might exist right underneath our very noses. For me, this type of art has really made me realise that humans are just one creature within a whole network of life. What we think is normal, other species would probably think is weird and mysterious, and vice versa. ... It has also made me question why we are so intent on finding life away from Earth, when most of us don't even appreciate the inspiring array of life here in our very own backyard! (Haefeli 2012, para.3)



Fig. 42: Maria Fernanda Cardoso, *Museum of Copulatory Organs*, 2012, multimedia installation. Sydney; Sydney Biennale.

Courtesy of the artist (©). Photo: Penny Clay (©)

Similarly, regarding Mutu's *'Try Dismantling the Little Empire Inside of You'* the afore quoted viewer stated:

It is something that all women deal with, but some get sucked into the easier, thornier web of social trends. Women want to feel attractive and emotionally valid, but what we really need as women is to create our own personal standards – not allowing it get inside and taint ourselves. (Fortner 2007, para.6)

Besides grappling with general political issues, both viewers also relate the subject matter to their own life; a situation that Iser, following Dewey, described as follows:

The ability to perceive oneself during the process of participation is an essential quality of the aesthetic experience; the observer finds himself in a strange, halfway position: he is involved, and he watches himself being involved. (Iser 1994 [1976], p.134)⁴⁹

This intermediate position of the viewer is related to a condition referred to as 'psychical distance' (Funch 1997, pp.188–194; Cupchik 2002), a concept introduced by the aesthetician Edward Bullough (1912). Like Immanuel Kant's concept of 'disinterestedness'⁵⁰, psychical distance describes a mode of engaging with art objects that is removed from all practical concerns. In contrast to Kant, however, whose argument is rooted in metaphysics, Bullough based his theory in psychology. Psychical distance enables viewers to better understand their own modes of responding:

[Psychical Distance] has a negative, inhibitory aspect – the cutting-out of the practical sides of things and of our practical attitude to them – and a positive side – the elaboration of the experience on the new basis created by the inhibitory action of Distance. (Bullough 1912, p.89)

The recognition of an object 'as art' inhibits actions that real-world phenomena would foster (we do not actually talk back to Rembrandt's 'Syndics' or comment on spelling mistakes in Wool's word paintings). Psychical distance entails a division between the observing self and emotions and response behaviour the observer would usually have given certain observations s/he makes. This mode of viewing allows for the contemplation of depictions and objects, including uncomfortable ones, and to observe one's own response to them. According to Bullough, it is crucial to realise an appropriate balance between engagement

⁴⁹ For a related, psychological perspective, see: Pelowski and Akiba (2011), see also Olafur Eliasson's statement quoted in chapter one, p 23.

⁵⁰ See: chapter one, note 26.

and distance, which is in fact *“the utmost decrease of Distance without its disappearance”*, and separate the object and its appeal *“from one’s own self, by putting it out of gear with practical needs and ends”* (Bullough 1912, p.94,89). However, this must not exceed the point where the work loses its capacity to affect the viewer: *“[T]he relation between the self and the object”* must not be *“broken to the extent of becoming ‘impersonal’”* (Bullough 1912, p.89).

Whilst Iser’s reader simply *‘finds himself’* in the *‘halfway position’*, Bullough posited that we must interpret our own *“‘subjective’ affections not as modes of our being but rather as characteristics of the phenomenon”* (Bullough 1912, p.89). Under certain circumstances this seems to happen automatically as the Strand-viewer’s example shows; however, it is also influenced by many contextual factors. In the next chapter it will be argued that much of the *context* in which art is usually apprehended works in favour of this attitude, and that artists have developed various strategies to facilitate a balance of emotional and reflective responses.

Psychical distance is *one* aspect of separative meaning-making. This thesis agrees that strategically, it is important for art aiming to *turn the viewer back to her/himself (as viewer)*; here, however, additional emphasis is placed on the viewer’s *reflection* on her/his own involvement. Also, whilst Bullough rejected treating artworks as an inspiration for personal fantasies – a condition he called *‘under-distanced’* – such imagination is not considered problematic to the theory of meaning-making advanced here, as long as it does not contradict the work’s repertoire. Examples of *explicit* reflections on one’s own involvement would be McCloskey’s testimonial and the ‘Mutu-viewer’s’ as she feels *‘the same internal struggle of contemporary beauty standards’* and wonders what she *‘should and should not be doing as an independent woman’*. A more *implicit* version is exemplified by the Cardoso-viewer, as she realised that *‘humans are just one creature within a whole network of life’* etc. but did not thematise her personal position in relation to these issues. Either way, apprehensions like these reflect self-generated purposes that potentially promote habitual/conceptual change.

3.6.4 The Interrelation of Retrieval, Speculation, Separation

The three levels of meaning-making are neither mutually exclusive nor phenomenologically distinct. McCloskey retrieved in passing that “*maternity can be traced as a theme in [Bourgeois] work*” but promptly clarified that she was in a *separative* mode of meaning-making: “[I]t is the connecting to the maternal (my maternal) through the specificity of the encounter that is relevant here” (McCloskey 2010, p.2). This is a rather explicit distinction between two modes of meaning-making but it is likely that viewers will often not distinguish between different approaches. One might believe one is retrieving the artist’s intentions, but in fact one has already wandered into more general considerations. In this vein, Weltzl-Fairchild, drawing on her empirical studies, argued that viewers often suggest “*in a spirit of play ... other versions, solutions, or variations of the work of art*” (Weltzl-Fairchild 1991, p.278). An effect may be that these changes “*bring about a self-knowledge, a revelation of what the viewer is like and what she values*” (Weltzl-Fairchild 1991, p.278). Such reflections are distinct from reflections in retrieval mode; however, they may not be registered as such.

Despite the difficulties involved in disentangling the three levels of meaning-making in practice, it is useful to theoretically distinguish them. Mere retrieval neglects that artworks can take on a variety of meanings beyond the context of their production. In speculation mode, art apprehension is more playful but remains committed to explaining the art object in terms of its objective features. Only in separation mode does meaning-making respond to *political, social, environmental, or cultural issues* and/or *refer the viewer back to her/himself (as viewer)*.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter sought to elucidate the relation between the third person perspective of ‘meaning of’ the artwork, and the first person perspective of its ‘meaning to’ an art viewer. In a theory of meaning-making, which emphasises the idiosyncratic activity of the viewer, the former’s relevance is largely restricted to the work’s *repertoire*. Borrowing this term from Wolfgang Iser, the repertoire is defined as those social norms, conventions and historical facts that constitute a work’s subject matter. As a basic constituent of the work, the repertoire must be taken into account as a platform on which personal meaning

is developed. Failure to appreciate the repertoire means to treat a work of art as a trigger for reflection just like any other random object.

'Meaning of' is not limited to the third person perspective but extends to the purpose a work fulfils for the individual viewer. To define *meaning* as personal *purpose* only makes sense if this purpose is not fixed by any external agent, be that an artist or any other authority. A work's purpose is thus subject to individual negotiation and as such converges with the notion of 'meaning to' as a source of personal benefit. The meaning-making viewer renders the artwork purposeful to her/himself by allowing it to promote habitual changes (including changes of concepts and attitudes): viewers create *a* meaning, building on *the* meaning of the artwork, which is limited to its repertoire and never complete.

Meaning as purpose and source of benefit does not depend on verbalisation. As immediate 'experience' it may have practical psychological consequences '*beneath interpretation*', which includes but is not limited to being a source of pleasure, self-affirmation or therapeutic effects. However, with respect to the focus on meaning-making as an act of *construction* or *elaboration*, language is a crucial tool. When reasons for the viewer's own emotional responses are put into words, meaning is made sharable and accessible to further elaboration. Additional 'meaning to' can be gained by meta-reflection, for example by questioning explicitly *how* the work integrates with the collection of other objects that belong to one's own experience of the world.

Meaning-making can be divided into three different 'modes', which have been defined as *retrieval*, *speculation* and *separation*. Meaning *retrieval* – whether focused on the necessary account of the repertoire or hoping to reveal the work's whole secret by seizing artistic intentions, symbols, etc. – can count only in a very limited sense as 'making' of meaning. More in line with the suggested creative notion of meaning-making is the playful, *speculative* mode, which involves formulating hypotheses regarding what certain features of a work and their internal relations can be seen as representing. The speculative attitude is experimental and consciously biased but, like retrieval, foregrounds the interpretation of a work's discernable features. Since much contemporary art points to critical issues of the world we live in, meaning-making must grapple with such subject matter, addressing it directly rather than dwelling on reflections of 'what looks like what' in the work. Meaning-making that goes

beyond the interpretation of the object's signifiers and focuses instead on the signified has been called *separative meaning-making*. This is the type of meaning making most pertinent to this thesis, and is therefore the focus of the following chapters.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST

As an artist you're looking for universal triggers. You want it both ways. You want it to have an immediate impact, and you want it to have deep meanings as well. ... When I make the artwork, anything I say, I try to deny it as well at the same time, so you make viewers responsible for interpretation. I think that's good. I want to make artwork that makes people question their own lives, rather than give them any answers.

Damien Hirst, 2007¹

The viewer testimonials discussed in chapter three were selected because they reflect certain types of response independent of the artist's intention. It is interesting to note that all of the artists whose works viewers commented on agree on the importance of viewer contribution. Wangechi Mutu explained that she is “*constantly trying to figure out ways*” to make viewers “*dialogue with whatever is there*” (Mutu & Enright 2008, para.24). Maria Fernanda Cardoso stated that “*the viewers' reading of the work of art completes it*” but also stressed the artist's responsibility to make the work's repertoire transparent:

[Y]ou also have to try to fill the 'gap in meaning' perhaps some other ways, perhaps by writing and talking about it, or being choosy about the context where you exhibit your artworks ... yet all this dance is part of what makes the work of art.

(Cardoso 2013, personal communication)

Jennifer Louise Martin agrees that “*the viewer has the freedom to interpret art how they like/want*” but that “*at the same time it is the artist's job to make artwork that evokes [the] kind of response they want*” (Martin 2012, personal communication). This differentiation points to the tension between the work's openness and its repertoire. Louise Bourgeois was interested in the viewer being “*no longer merely a viewer if he is able to move from the stage of viewing to the stage of collaborating*” which transforms her/him “*through a 'crise de conscience'*” from a passive “*into a person who becomes suddenly active ... through the creative act*” (Bourgeois 1976, p.372). Clare Strand is cautious not

¹ Hirst & Ayers (2007, para.24)

“to explain the image away and allow viewers no space for their own interpretation” and thus enjoys leaving issues “unsolved” (Strand et al. 2009, p.95). Given artist’s wide-spread interest in engaging viewers in (separative) meaning-making raises questions about how far their responsibilities and possibilities reach within the network of factors influencing an artwork’s reception. Before turning to this question, however, it is necessary to address the ‘intention to neglect intention’ paradox.

4.1 The ‘Intention of Neglecting Intention – Paradox’

Nicolas Bourriaud made an important point: “When an artist shows us something, he uses a transitive ethic which places his work between the ‘look-at-me’ and the ‘look-at-that’” (Bourriaud 2002 [1998], p.24). Art calls attention to form, medium, subject matter and context, which together make a work recognisable as an artist’s intentional product. The viewer sees the artist’s ‘actualised choices’ (Eco) and thus her/his subjective point of view (‘look-at-me’). However, this often includes the intention to make the viewer reflect on the work’s subject matter (‘look-at-that’) and to refrain from searching for the artist’s intentions. It has been argued that acknowledging an artwork’s repertoire is essential for its appropriate apprehension. It was also presumed that artworks made with the intention to be open for the viewer’s ‘contribution to the creative act’ are only appreciated appropriately if this intention is in fact realised by the viewer. The two premises seem to work against each other like Epimenides’ paradox: how can it be a valid artistic intention that the viewer neglects to look for artistic intention?

The answer lies in the difference between two *kinds* of intentions. For example, the Israel-Palestine conflict belongs to the repertoire of Friedl’s ‘Zoo Story’, which both directs and limits appropriate meaning-making in terms of its semantic content. By contrast, the openness of the work pertains to a general attitude the viewer shall adopt.² Philosopher Jerrold Levinson made a useful distinction between ‘semantic’ and ‘categorical’ [sic] intentions. The former pertain to a work’s subject matter (for example aiming to induce some imagination or suggesting a thematic frame), whereas the latter “govern not

² Friedl said that he “views the giraffe as a sculpture that can and should help visitors invent stories to go along with it” (cited by Deutsche Welle Online 2007, para.7).

what a work is to mean but how it is to be fundamentally conceived or approached”, reflecting “*the maker’s conception of what he has produced and what it is for*” (Levinson 1995, p.222,232).³ These intentions are distinct from the work’s subject matter and are not always ‘*extractable*’ because they are not made available in the same way as semantic intentions. Categorical intentions determine whether a stuffed giraffe should be understood as a political or ecological statement, for example, or as no statement at all, as it would if exhibited in a natural history museum. Each categorical understanding presupposes a different mode of approach, such as seeing something for its beauty or its political implications.

Although this thesis essentially agrees with Levinson’s distinction, the descriptor ‘*categorical*’ is not ideal. ‘*How*’ a work ‘*is to be fundamentally conceived or approached*’ is not only determined by categorisation. The same artwork may fall into different categories such as ‘*sculpture*’, ‘*ready-made*’, or ‘*political art*’, which demand different and perhaps controversial approaches. Also, the ‘*how*’ of dealing with an artwork may not be determined by categorical affiliation alone. Independent from categorical recognition, artworks can be approached in various *modes*, such as different types of meaning-making, meditative contemplation, physical participation, etc. From the artist’s perspective, the viewer’s adoption of a certain approach can also be described as a *modal intention*. Levinson’s definition of ‘*categorical intentions*’ still applies, yet its referent ‘*categorical*’ is replaced with the more comprehensive term ‘*modal*’.

Simon O’Sullivan suggested that more important than ‘*understanding*’ an artwork is “*being in a certain mode so that the practice ‘works’, something is activated by it*” (O’Sullivan 2006, p.80). Slightly shifting the notion of ‘*understanding*’, one might even say that to understand the work *is* partially to approach it in a certain *mode*. The artist’s modal intention that the viewer contributes to the creative act, reduces the relevance of her/his semantic intentions to the viewer’s comprehension of the repertoire. Modal and semantic intentions are epistemologically distinct. A viewer’s *mode of approach* (pertaining to a deliberate attitude) or *mode of reception* (including also visceral responses) does not presuppose a search for the artist’s *semantic* intentions.

³ In a similar vein, philosopher Roberto Casati argued that “*the artist can have intentions, but these concern the use of the work and not its interpretation*” (Casati 2003, p.7).

Thus, epistemological differentiation between *semantic* and *modal* intentions renders the ostensive paradox of intentions redundant.

4.2 The Artist's Responsibilities

Joseph Kosuth cautioned that: *"If my intention is denied at its inception, then my responsibility for the meaning I generate in the world as an artist is also nullified"* (Kosuth 1996, p.408). Kosuth's viewpoint highlights that not only from the (intentionalist) critic's position but also from the artist's, certain intentions are not to be left to the whim of the viewer. This includes the modal intention *"to engage the viewer/reader's participation in the meaning-making process"* (Kosuth 1996, p.409). Kosuth also referred to his (the artist's) *responsibility* in this respect, arguing that it entails *'standing up'* for one's own position as well as asking oneself how to convey relevant intentions. Clearly, this opinion is not shared by everyone. Some would emphatically deny this being the job of the artist: if anyone's it would be that of the curator or critic;⁴ however, I have argued in chapter one (and further in chapter six), that artists inevitably create artworks with a view to their reception. It is thus apt to consider their responsibility with respect to their works' reception.

The moderate intentionalist position claims that *"the best evidence for what an utterer, artist, or author intends to say or mean is the utterance or artwork itself"* (Carroll 2000, p.77). However, if that does not suffice, and it is granted that certain *actual* and not just *hypothetical*⁵ intentions of the artist are relevant, intentionalist criticism recommends the consultation of external sources, as Levinson explained:

The author's ancillary theoretical pronouncements; the rest of the author's corpus; the work of those of the author's contemporaries of whom he was aware; the social movements or political developments of the time that had a demonstrable impact on the author; and the author's participation in or identification with artistic movements. (Levinson 1995, p.247)

⁴ A pertinent example is painter Georg Baselitz' declaration: *"The artist is not responsible to anyone. His social role is asocial; his only responsibility consists in an attitude to the work he does. There is no communication with any public whatsoever. The artist can ask no question, and he makes no statement; he offers no information, and his work cannot be used. It is the end product which counts, in my case the picture"* (cited by Gablik 1992, p.2).

⁵ See: chapter three, note 10.

To scrutinise such resources may be pertinent for scholars who assess a work through comprehensive retrieval, but it is of little use to viewers in an exhibition as they can hardly be sent to the library before being able to grasp a work's repertoire and adopt the desired mode of approach. Formalist anti-intentionalists would respond that it is the artist's task to design "*his work in such a way that the receiver can process it successfully*" (Beardsley 1980, p.191). However, post-structuralist critics would be quick to argue that this is a contentious claim as it will be difficult to determine who the receiver is, what s/he requires to know, and what '*successfully*' means in each instance. Clearly artists cannot be held responsible for ensuring that every viewer is able to grasp the repertoire and any modal intentions, but does this mean that artists are relieved of *all* responsibility to consider defaults for reception? The following example illustrates this problem.

Artist Ghada Amer's work '*Untitled (John Rose)*' (1999) (Fig.43a) shown at the 2000 Whitney Biennial was reviewed by Arthur Danto:

Her paintings look, the catalog concedes, 'like finely drawn, delicate abstractions.' The informed eye leads one to surmise that her work shows the influence of Cy Twombly. But ... the eye is a very poor guide to what we in fact see.... the forms are not abstract but derived from images of women in pornographic magazines... Amer is making, by means of stitched prurient imagery, some statement about the representation of women. One would not know this without help. (Danto 2007, p.23)

To underpin an argument for the pertinence of the artist's intention, philosopher Hans Maes cited this review and concluded that if even Danto – "*arguably one of the most respected art critics today*" – as well as other critics⁶ admit that "*without the explanation we have no way of knowing what we are looking at*", we are justified to "*look for reports of artistic intention to solve our interpretive quandaries*" (Maes 2010, pp.134,133,138). This conclusion neglects that an artist like Amer should be interested in ensuring through the means at her own disposal that essential information (in this case the work's feminist repertoire)

⁶ Maes refers to Kimberley Lamm who confirmed that some of Amer's works "*at first glance seem to be Abstract Expressionist paintings but are actually pornographic images of women embroidered onto canvases with colored thread*" (Maes 2010, p.135). For a similar assessment, see: Haber (2000).

can be understood.⁷ These means will usually be the work itself, although they might extend to informational directives provided alongside in an exhibition. An alternative to Maes' conclusion would be that Amer simply fails to make a fundamental intention intelligible, and this is, Danto confirms, no exception since *"a lot of the art being made today ... we know to be meaningful but whose meaning we cannot grasp"* (Danto 1994, p.xiii).⁸ In this particular case one wonders however if any of the critics have closely looked at the work. In fact, Amer's repertoire is not particularly disguised (Fig. 43b).

Amer cannot be made responsible for viewers who fail to see ostensive details in her work but this does not mean that artists cannot fail to guide reception in a way appropriate to their work, or that such guidance is not in their own interest. Criticism must take into account

whether an artist is content with the way her/his work is exhibited. Regarding the 2007 Documenta – the exhibition where Friedl's 'Zoo Story' was shown –



Fig. 43 a + b (total + detail): Ghada Amer, *Untitled (John Rose)*, 1999, acrylic, embroidery, and gel medium on canvas, 183 x 183 cm.

Private collection. Courtesy of Ghada Amer and Gallery Cheim & Read, New York (©). Licensed by Bildrecht, Vienna, 2014 (©)

⁷ It is unlikely that Amer would be equally content with an interpretation rendering her ideas subservient to her formal interests as she explained: *"I am telling my story. I am really basically like a writer who is writing a diary. I cannot write, so I am painting it. People can 'read' it and they have to take it, or if it is something they don't really understand, they don't get touched. Others, if it touches them, they get invigorated"* (Amer et al. 2010, p.135). Compare: Umberto Eco's example of Jean Dubuffet's 'Materiologies': chapter three, note 17.

⁸ Michael Parsons went even further as he argued: *"In many works what one needs to know cannot be taken for granted, even as part of a well-educated, art historical background. In these cases the meaning needs to be explained to the viewer or the work has little meaning"* (Parsons 2002, p.31).

critic Jörg Heiser complained that the “*absence of any factual information on the wall labels*” might give viewers the impression that they are expected “*to give the right answer to an unintelligible question*” (Heiser 2007, para.4). It would only be fair to criticise Friedl for difficulties in apprehending his giraffe on appropriate terms if he supported this curatorial policy.⁹

The above discussion shifts the focus from the artist’s *responsibility* to the artist’s *personal interest* and the means used to articulate it. Even if artists rely on curators and external facilitators to contextualise their work appropriately, it can be expected that the material they provide themselves will be noticed. Rather than taking a neutral position, not giving intentions away promotes *arbitrary* rather than *open* meaning-making.

4.3 Confining and Facilitating Aspects of the Viewing Context

All strategies aiming to involve the viewer in the meaning-making process come with contextual limitations. *Context* in the realm of art apprehension has two closely related dimensions: the viewer’s personal dispositions, and the modification of these dispositions through viewing situations pertaining to where and how a work is presented. Philosopher David E.W. Fenner defined context as “*all those various lenses – ethical, social, sexual, emotional, imaginative, political, religious, and so forth – through which a work of art may appropriately be viewed*” (Fenner 2008, p.1).¹⁰ Appropriate ‘*lenses*’ are, to an extent, suggested by the work’s repertoire and the environment in which it is presented, but they are also shaped by the unique perspective of each viewer. In the vein of Eco’s *Open Work* the variety of these unique perspectives is what ultimately validates the work. If one is to gain any influence on these perspectives – and if that is at all possible – one must consider socio-cultural factors that permeate individual viewpoints. A wider, socio-cultural notion of context will be considered before focussing on the specific notion of context in (art) exhibition environments.

⁹ Indeed, Friedl is vulnerable to such charges as he declared in relation to his work at the Documenta: “*A lack of information, which would sometimes be desirable, doesn’t exist in art*” (cited by Deutsche Welle Online 2007, para.7). If this was true, the origin of his giraffe would be irrelevant.

¹⁰ For a summary of these factors, see: Fenner (2003, pp.46–53).

4.3.1 The Viewer's Mindset and the Culture of Art Viewing

As argued in 3.5.2, meaning-making often begins before the actual encounter with the artwork. Viewers have different motivations for looking at art, and these motivations are modified by situational factors. People visit galleries as tourists, for study reasons, for matters of social prestige, etc. and thereby arrive with very different mindsets (Sifakakis 2007). An important factor in the web of pre-conceptions concerns expectations associated with certain artists' names. Regarding the author of literary fiction, Michel Foucault argued that her/his name is a ...

... functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. (Foucault 2008 [1969], p.292)

In this view, preconceptions that readers (or, by extension, art viewers) have about the author/artist play a major role in how they will process a work. Even if we put aside the scope of influence that Foucault assigns to this, we cannot deny that various cultural factors co-determine how we encounter works of art.

Prior knowledge on the part of every viewer is influenced by exposure to other people's opinion, cultural conventions, the media etc., a fact that Blake Gopnik dramatised as he concluded:

Elites and experts of one kind or another, from mothers to priests to art critics to college professors – even some scientists – may be almost entirely responsible for what an artwork makes us feel, think, and say at any given time. (Gopnik 2012, p.130)

Gopnik's claim is bold but not unfounded. It explains why so many viewers look for the intention of the artist, the work's symbolic meaning, and/or the 'official version' of interpretation. The challenge for artists interested in the viewer's creative contribution is to move beyond these approaches.

With his idea of the 'emancipated spectator', Jacques Rancière offered a theoretical model that undermines official versions of interpretation (whether explicitly provided by the gallery or merely assumed to exist by the viewer).

Rancière introduced the concept of the *'ignorant master'*¹¹ as an analogy for the artist who invites the audience to examine the work as if venturing *"into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified"* (Rancière 2009, p.11). A viewer can only learn what the artist *'master'* does *not yet know* her/himself, as: *"She learns it as an effect of the mastery that forces her to search and verifies this research. But she does not learn the schoolmaster's knowledge"* (Rancière 2009, p.14). In this model, the artist promotes *'emancipated spectators'* by presenting them with problematic fields of subject matter, whilst (in the vein of Iser's negation) refraining from imposing her/his own opinions.¹² The problem remains that this modal intention must somehow become transparent to the viewer.

Before discussing the task of working against official versions, it must be noted that art critics and curators can also enhance the transparency of the work's repertoire and facilitate environments that help viewer's realise the artist's modal intentions. The function of art theorists, according to Gopnik, is to facilitate a change in viewers' understanding and emotional response to the work by presenting interesting perceptions that they, due to a lack of expertise or differing viewpoints, do not have. In this view, new meaning is made by art theorists because they – through articles, catalogue essays, wall texts, etc. – shape the general apprehension of art and are perceived as the most qualified to process art's complex languages.¹³

In theory, artists can influence meaning-making using the same methods as critics and philosophers; they can publish their own texts, offer interviews and artist's talks, or maintain a website. Kosuth described such contributions as *"primary theory"* and as being superior to *'experts'* *"secondary theory"*:

¹¹ Rancière referred here to his earlier publication *'The Ignorant Schoolmaster. Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation'* which recounts the method of Joseph Jacotot (1770-1840), a lecturer who taught Flemish without knowing the language himself, arguing that: *"I must teach you that I have nothing to teach you"* (Rancière 1991 [1987], p.15). Jacotot tried to make sense of bilingual texts conjointly with his students. In effect, he did not aim to transmit his knowledge but rather foster his students' own productive powers.

¹² See: chapter three, note 42.

¹³ This is consistent with Anne-Marie Émond's observation that many viewers in contemporary art exhibitions are not sure if they understand the art and *"would like to spend more time with a contemporary art work but find they do not have the tools to do so"* (Émond 2013, personal communication).

The act of putting [art]¹⁴ into the world is empty unless an artist also fights for its meaning. This informational framing of the proposition itself increasingly becomes part of the artistic process. Thus, a key to the changed role of intention and the artist's self-perception of his or her practice, is the role of writing by artists.

(Kosuth 1996, p.408)

Kosuth's '*primary theory*' concept is evidenced by a number of self-publishing artists such as Victor Burgin, Olafur Eliasson, or Liam Gillick whose statements receive as much attention as those of leading critics and philosophers. Their theoretical works are published in art magazines and edited volumes (for example Stiles & Selz 2012), found in museum bookshops, and quoted in wall texts. However, whether such texts should be considered '*primary theory*' *per se* is debatable since we cannot assume that artists are necessarily more versed to contextualise their work than professional critics or philosophers. Also, less well-known artists will find it more difficult to have their views published than famous personalities. What would have to be examined further is how artist writings are proliferated, and what impact they actually have on different audiences.

Gopnik's view implies a certain omnipotence of expert opinions. The influence of these factors is undeniable, but it is also relative to culturally and/or phylogenetically determined elements that are not exclusively bound to art-related and expert-mediated knowledge. For example, people aim to integrate disparate patterns and objects according to Gestalt-laws (Arnheim 1974) and spontaneous emotional responses. They react with "*anger, confusion, disgust, pride, surprise, and other unusual aesthetic emotions*" (Silvia 2009, p.48). Being stimulated emotionally can suspend learned art assessment schemata and the viewer's emotional response can itself become the object of separative meaning-making (as exemplified by the responses of the Bourgeois- and the Strand-viewer discussed in 3.4 and 3.5.1).

Another argument against the omnipotence of expert opinions are studies suggesting that viewers of contemporary art tend to rely more on their own perception than viewers of traditional art (Émond 2006a; Mastandrea et al. 2009). Anne-Marie Émond observed that non art specialist viewers¹⁵ often

¹⁴ Kosuth circumscribed the term referring to a "*signifying action, which may or may not employ the object, performance, video, text, et al.*" (Kosuth 1996, p.408).

¹⁵ Émond's study focussed on people who visit museums more than twice a year.

create a story that can be associated with the artwork, and that their comments are *“more like personal narratives than observations based on factual knowledge”* (Émond 2006a, p.84). This observation resonates with the concept of speculative meaning-making. Finally, the influence of the artist’s name may also be called into question since in many situations viewers are simply not familiar with this name.

The above named factors mitigate the power of expert opinions, but they do not concurrently empower the voice of the artist, instead they point to the limits of all contextualising theory. Opportunities artists have to influence the broad range of socio-cultural factors that affect meaning-making exist but remain limited. Further entry points for framing one’s works’ apprehension are available in the physical, more immediate context of the gallery or museum. However, as institutions, these places have an idiosyncratic influence on viewing habits that can be both problematic and beneficial for separative meaning-making.

4.3.2 The Viewer’s Mindset and the Gallery Atmosphere

The question of how gallery/museum contexts can shape the apprehension of art has been hotly debated. Empirical research confirms the common assumption of these debates that the experience of artworks *“arises in and through socially organised, embodied practices at the exhibit-face”* (vom Lehn 2010, p.33). For Umberto Eco, a frame sufficed to *“turn a piece of sackcloth into an artifact”* (Eco 1989 [1962], p.99) and according to Danto the gallery’s *“atmosphere of artistic theory”* can turn any object into one that will be regarded as meaningful (Danto 1964, p.580). Gallery and museum environments can therefore fundamentally transform the ontological status of an object, such as a household item on a supermarket shelf to an object of high art in Andy Warhol’s *‘Brillo Box (Soap Pads)’* (1964) (Danto 1964; 1981; 2000, see also Dickie 1974). Artist and critic Brian O’Doherty concluded that *“the esthetics of the wall”* inevitably *“artify the work in a way that frequently diffuses its intentions”* (O’Doherty 1999 [1976], p.29). This will often concern the artist’s modal intention that viewers treat the work as open to be endowed with their own meaning. The apprehension of artworks is further influenced by exhibition

themes and presentation headlines,¹⁶ neighbouring works, lighting, and the architectural environment (Choi 1999; Bourdeau & Chebat 2001).

Any institutional framework that presents objects or situations 'as art' channels and preconfigures meaning-making through mechanisms of selection, promotion, collection, display and the appeal to certain audiences (Dickie 1997;



Fig. 44: Tony Oursler, *Swathe*, 2004, fiberglass sculpture, video projection, loud speakers, 74 x 81 x 38 cm.

Philbrook Museum, Tulsa, USA. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures. Photo: The Philbrook Museum of Art, Inc., Tulsa, Oklahoma, 2013 (©)

Becker 1984; Bourdieu 1991 [1966]). Artists have taken issue with these mechanisms, collectively known as '*institutional critique*',¹⁷ but – certain ephemera or intervention practices left aside (see Wright 2008) – there is no escape from art being recognised and treated *as art*. Since the awareness of seeing art commonly activates attitudes of meaning-retrieval, one should expect an atmosphere reminiscent of a works' 'artiness' to be a major antagonist of separative meaning-making. However, the gallery environment has an ambivalent function in that respect. There are even many situations in which it promotes rather than contradicts this kind of response.

Works with robust visceral appeal can effectively profit from the gallery's theoretical counter-appeal. One viewer's response to Tony Oursler's video projections of faces and facial parts onto various surfaces, such as dolls' heads or simple geometric objects (Figs. 44, 50, 53), serves as an example:

¹⁶ New York times art critic Roberta Smith remarked: "*The exhibition titles ... in many cases are a show's main cleverness*" and gave some expectation-fuelling examples: "*Better Than Sex, Better Than Disneyland*" ... '*Binge and Purge*' ... '*Photography Is Not an Art!*' ... '*Montezuma's Revenge*' ... '*Men and Materials*'" (R. Smith 2006, para.4).

¹⁷ I do not discuss '*institutional critique*' here as related artistic strategies have largely focused on art commenting on itself in its system. By contrast, this thesis highlights practices with a momentum to make viewers re-perceive the world in which we live, and this is, usually, not the art world (although this may sometimes be difficult to disentangle). For a collection of artists' writings and an introduction to institutional critique, see: Alberro & Stimson (2009); Raunig & Ray (2009).

You see people crying, laughing, yelling, drunk, etc. and it never seems odd ... that's what everyone does. But this was on a totally different scale. It was right there, in your face and there was no way to get away from it. I think that when you're out in public, you can avoid feeling uncomfortable by people's displays of emotion. I don't really think about my own thoughts and feelings when I see people in public displaying their own emotion, but Oursler's work ... made me think about what's acceptable to do in public and what's not. For instance, if you could avoid it, you wouldn't cry hysterically in public, at least I wouldn't. But, when you see someone doing that, it tends to seem more dramatic than it is. (Jellots 2008, para.1)

The viewer's emphasis on the difference between '*what you see in public*' and what she experienced in the gallery demonstrates the psychical distance that an institutional context can proffer. The statement suggests that the viewer did not approach the work in *retrieval* mode, and, if she did, it seems to have been suspended by an *emotional* response. As in the examples of the Mutu-, the Bourgeois- and the Strand-viewer discussed in the previous chapter, this response suggests a strong sense of *emotional* recognition of 'real life' phenomena, which is taken over by a more reflective attitude. Arguably, this assessment would have been unlikely if the viewer had encountered the same work in the context of a department store or a nightclub. The gallery's '*atmosphere of theory*' clarifies that objects on display are intentionally made and have been placed there to be thought about, and related thinking is not limited to *art theory*.

The gallery context does not diffuse initial emotional responses altogether, but it can frame them. Psychological research suggests that *interest* as the driving force behind learning, seeking information, and adopting general explorative and creative attitudes, develops best in 'safe' yet 'innovative' contexts (Izard 1977; Kaplan 1992; Silvia 2006). Art venues often provide such an atmosphere, one that promotes '*psychical distance*' and encourages viewers "*to perceive consciously a system in which [they] had hitherto been unconsciously caught up*" (Iser 1994, p.212). Empirical research confirms that people commonly visit galleries expecting a positive experience (Émond 2002; 2008; Chen 2009; Mastandrea et al. 2009), and this includes a "*pleasure of discourse*" (Émond 2008, p.55). The question thus becomes how advantageous

effects can be harnessed while circumventing retrieval-focussed art assessment schemata.

The gallery context offers artists some opportunities to influence a work's reception. By giving works titles (which can be expected to be provided alongside), artists have traditionally worked at the interstices between art and curation. Some have also written their own wall texts (examples include Alfredo Jaar and Dan Graham). Another approach is to motivate people to spend more time with the work (Smith & Smith 2001; Hensher 2011). "*Responding to a work takes time*", Michael Parsons elaborated, because ...

... it requires a type of inquiry in which one looks closely at it, grasps some things quickly, explores their connections with other items, checks out possible further connections in light of what is seen in the work and of what is already known, grasps some further things; and so on. (Parsons 2002, p.33)

Psychological research suggests that when viewers are prepared and able to interact with a work for at least 10 continuous minutes it changes their expectations and muddies the question of what it means to '*understand*' the work's '*message*' (Pelowski 2007; also Lachapelle 2010). This is a challenge for curators but also an issue that some artists have addressed. Jaar for example, explained that he is frequently shocked at the short amount of time viewers spend with artworks (Jaar & Phillips 2005). In response to this, he designs his installations to slow viewers down and "*encourage people to take time, to stop, to read*" (Jaar & Phillips 2005, p.12).

Despite some contextual 'levers' to tackle the wider culture of art apprehension and specific viewing situations the main starting point for artists to facilitate the viewer's meaning-making remains the work itself. It has already been argued that a crucial component of meaning-making is the interplay of emotional and intellectual aspects, and that both can be facilitated through the work itself. The next section takes a closer look at these and at their relation to contextual aspects.

4.4 Work and Context: Balancing Emotional Stimuli

Established media and modes of framing (oil on canvas, objects on plinths, etc.) establish objects as contemplative material. The “*visibly intentional arrangement or unification*”, Bullough wrote, “*must by the mere fact of its presence, enforce Distance, by distinguishing the object from the confused, disjointed and scattered form of actual experience*” (Bullough 1912, p.106). Although it is debatable that art can be excluded from ‘*actual experience*’, Bullough’s general point is still valid. Some stylistic features and/or subject matters have a tendency to reduce and others to foster ‘*psychical distance*’, facilitating the viewer’s awareness of her/his position as observing subject. Arguably, art performances with live actors will have a greater tendency to diminish the viewer’s distance than a sculpture on a plinth. The same is true for works with a subject matter involving affairs currently in the news or topics with a strong sensual appeal such as sexual scenes or acts of cruelty.

Rancière argued that in order for art to be ‘*political*’ the artist must ensure “*the readability of a political signification*” (the repertoire) “*and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification*” (Rancière 2013 [2003], p.59).¹⁸ Similarly, pragmatist art theory, Iser’s theory of reading, and many other theories of art apprehension subscribe to the idea that art’s transformative power presupposes an initial experience of dissonance. In this similar vein, Rancière appeals to an ‘*art of dissensus*’:

There is dissensus when there is something wrong in the picture, when something is not at the right place. There is dissensus when we don’t know how to designate what we see, when a name no longer suits the thing or the character that it names, etc. ... It means a displacement or a break in a given set of places and identities. (Rancière 2007b, p.560)

Like Iser’s concept of ‘*negation*’, Rancière’s ‘*dissensus*’ relies on upsetting the viewer as an important impulse to participate in meaning-making. Psychological approaches often refer to the concept of *cognitive dissonance*, a

¹⁸ A good example of this quality is Marc Quinn’s ‘*Alison Lapper (8 months)*’ (see: 2.2, pp.43/44 and the discussion in 6.2.1).

term introduced by Leon Festinger (1957).¹⁹ Émond defined it in relation to art viewing as “a lack of coherence between the visitor’s knowledge and what he/(she) was viewing or between expectations and what was occurring at the moment in the museum” (Émond 2006b, p.4).²⁰ Pelowski and Akiba described the resulting challenge, which requires the viewer ...

... to overcome the human instinct of escape or assimilation through surface evaluation or self-withdrawal and instead enter an intractable position whereby one might use their own disruptive encounter as a means of self-retransformation, and therefore come to believe or see something new ...

(Pelowski & Akiba 2011, p.92)

In this view, failure to understand an artwork by meaning-retrieval can lead to meta-cognitive reflection (or separative meaning-making; the viewer being *turned back to him/herself as viewer*) if the viewer is motivated to scrutinize ‘*that which resists signification*’.

Whether viewers will feel motivated to explore their own process of reasoning and overcome the dissonant situation depends on many personal and situational factors. However, artists deliberately provoke dissonant experiences. Strategies for ‘shocking the viewer’, for example, have been hotly debated.²¹ Offensive works may cause public debates and the occasional scandal²² (another – ‘*relational*’ – facet of meaning-making); more importantly, such strategies disrupt conventional, retrieval-focussed art assessment schemata. As discussed in 3.5.2, viewing habits can be suspended by an

¹⁹ Festinger (1957) defined ‘*cognitive dissonance*’ as a state where one’s actions or behaviours contradict one’s beliefs. One example of this is the cognitive dissonance that 18th century Christians faced when engaging in the very anti-Christian action of keeping other people as slaves, hence they convinced themselves that slaves were not ‘people’ at all to overcome the dilemma. Robert L. Solso has re-framed the notion as ‘*visual dissonance*’ and argued that its evocation has been a common strategy of artists; Solso defines it as “a state of psychological tension caused when one experiences a disparity between what one expects to see and what one actually sees” (Solso 1994, p.122).

²⁰ The converse experience, *cognitive consonance*, is often linked to finding expectations of ‘what art should be like’ confirmed (Weltzl-Fairchild et al. 1997; Émond 2006b). However, Émond’s studies point to notions of viewers’ ‘*entering into*’ and identifying with the work, which can also make them “*more aware of their personal psychological functioning*” (Émond 2006b, p.8). This assessment lends support to the productive merit of relational art’s focus on convivial experiences, and it is confirmed by the example of the Bourgeois-viewer (3.4); however, the relation between consonant experiences and meaning-making would require further examination.

²¹ For related discussions, see: Bayles (1994), Beech (2006), Cashell (2009), Korsmeyer (2011), Doyle (2013).

²² Compare: Raymond W. Gibbs’ discussion of works by Andres Serrano, Karen Finley, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Cindy Sherman (Gibbs 1999, pp.295–301).

'affective ambush' that evokes the impression of a 'promise of meaning' and related strategies are not limited to predictable shock effects.

Many kinds of stimuli facilitate innate or learned responses and artists have worked with a variety of auditory, olfactory and tactile triggers (Di Benedetto 2007). Three examples of emotional appeal are: disgust, sexual arousal, and empathy. They vary in complexity and all of them have been the subject of extended debates that cannot be covered here. The subsequent account will be limited to a discussion of their potential function as antagonists of art assessment schemata that focus on artistic intention, symbolic content, or formal qualities involved in meaning retrieval. Much art working with strong emotional stimuli destroys the '*psychical distance*' characteristic of meaning-retrieval (or aims to do so). Since a certain distance is also needed to achieve separative meaning-making its eventual recoument is indispensable. For this reason, factors that facilitate a return to reflective meaning-making must be considered.

4.4.1 Disgust

Disgust is a universal and fundamental human emotion that serves the evolutionary function of helping protect the life of an organism by warning against possibly harmful substances (David & Olatunji 2011). Cultural theorist Winfried Menninghaus observed:

The disgusting may well be the strongest possible stimulator of the human perceptual apparatus. It generates strong defensive affects which, at the same time, are powerful instants of self-perception on the part of the system forced to defend its own integrity.
(Menninghaus 2003, p.398)

What people find *disgusting* is to a great extent culturally determined, and thus to some level predictable. Disgust is particularly likely to be generated by certain notions of death, such as the decomposition of human corpses and other organic matter (Menninghaus 2003; Korsmeyer 2011). Such effects must be carefully directed. If viewers simply turn away nauseated, or write the work off as sensationalism ('shock for shock's sake') the potential to instigate meaning-making is defused. To evoke disgust in relation to issues of death or harm, the negative emotional impulse needs to be counterbalanced and

reduced to the extent that the viewer accepts it as a challenge. It is easy to draw attention using a strong emotional provocation, but it is difficult to facilitate its retention and subsequent reflection. Audience research confirms that viewers tend to “react to strong provocative work but do not pursue what they have undertaken with the work” (Émond 2013, personal communication).

The level of disgust necessary to disturb viewers and the level of displeasure they are willing to face naturally differ from subject to subject, however, the *disgusting* is still ‘managed’ by artists. According to Menninghaus, Cindy Sherman’s use of ‘high-gloss beauty’ in her ‘Disgust’ series²³ and Damien Hirst’s use of laboratory-instruments to frame his cadaver sculptures are examples of this type of management (Menninghaus 2003, p.400). Also, closer inspection of repulsive works sometimes reveals clues asking for a reflective approach, as, for example, the Iraqi money spread under the cow’s feet in Damien Hirst’s ‘The Promise of Money’ (2003) (Fig. 45).



Fig. 45: Damien Hirst, *The Promise of Money*, 2003, resin, steel, mirror, pigments, cow hair, glass eyes, sling, hoist, Iraqi money and blood, dimensions untraceable.

© Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates. Licensed by Bildrecht, Vienna, 2013 (©)



Fig. 46: Santiago Sierra, *21 Anthropometric Modules Made of Human Faeces By the People of Sulabh International, India*, 2005/2006, 20 parts, mixed media, each 75 x 215 x 20 cm.

David Roberts Collection, London. Exhibition shown: *Santiago Sierra*, Magasin 3 Konsthall, Stockholm (2009). Photo: Thomas Hagström (©)

²³ In her ‘Disgust’ series (1986-90), Sherman explored by means of staged photography issues of decay, loathing food, fecal matter, corpses, etc. For an analysis how Sherman’s works overlay multiple meanings and her general strategies to appeal to audiences on a visceral as well as a intellectual level, see: Ingelfinger (2010).

Whilst usually contextual features balance the disgusting, sometimes it is evoked only in the interplay of work and context. Without its explanatory title ‘21 Anthropometric Modules Made of Human Faeces By the People of Sulabh International, India’, Santiago Sierra’s 2006 (inodorous) work may easily be mistaken for a minimalist sculpture (Fig. 46). The work challenges the viewer to question precisely whether s/he is disgusted at all, fostering the ‘*strange halfway position*’ in which s/he is at the same time involved and watches her/himself being involved (see 3.6.3).

4.4.2 Sexual Attraction

Advertising research suggests that emotional responses evoked by sexual information through images, sound, or text, are to a great extent predictable; they easily attract attention, cause arousal and are memorable (for a review, see Belch et al. 1987). It can never be guaranteed that a work of art will not be appreciated for the ‘wrong’ reasons (that is: contradicting its repertoire) but it is clear that sexual stimuli tend to draw particular attention (Lykins et al. 2008; Rupp & Wallen 2008). Thus they are effective to suspend art assessment schemata but, again, they require counterbalancing. Wangechi Mutu summarised the resultant challenge:

[T]he thing you’re drawing them [the audience] in with is also the thing with which you’re planning to sting them. How do you use the same gesture to draw them in that you would use to smack the hand and wake them up? (Mutu & Enright 2008, para.24)²⁴

The assumption (or perhaps just the diction) that the audience should be ‘*woken up*’ is debatable, but the methodological implication is clear. Within her feminist agenda, Mutu employs images of naked women. In ‘*The Ark Collection*’ (2006), for example, she explored the objectifying image of African women in the western world by overlaying ethnographic photographs of African culture with western pornographic representations of black women (Fig. 47). By means

²⁴ Not referring to sexual stimuli in particular, a similar point was made by Mauricio Cattelan as he explained, referring to his audience: “*I like to give them something appealing and then to slap them. The deception is to make them think it could be nice and then to deliver something that probably they don’t want to face. This is always in my mind*” (Cattelan & Earnest 2011, para.61).

of her collage technique, the original sexual appeal of the images becomes vague; their fragmentation and disruption defies voyeuristic consumption.

Vanessa Beecroft, renowned for having groups of attractive, young, and mostly naked women pose in front of audiences, deals with a similar challenge. Journalist and artist Mimi Seldner who participated as a model in Beecroft's 'VB #69' (2010) (Fig. 48) reported the artist handing out rule sheets with precise instructions for the girls:

"[D]on't speak", "don't laugh", "don't act sexy", "forget that you are naked", "don't engage with people", "be strong", "be distant", "be dazed", "pretend you are wearing a uniform", "ignore people who look at you too long", and "look back towards the audience from a position of power". (Seldner 2010, para.4)



Fig. 47: Wangechi Mutu, *The Ark Collection* (detail), 2006, collages on postcards displayed in 4 vitrines.

Courtesy of Susanne Vielmetter, Los Angeles and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York



Fig. 48: Vanessa Beecroft, *VB #69*, 2010, performance with live models; Miami, The Standard Hotel.

Photo: PRISM (©)

Obedient behaviour and the immobile, stern and regimented choreography are to ensure effects (at least on male viewers) that critic Dave Hickey described with respect to earlier works by Beecroft:

[W]e are denied both the privacy of contemplating a representation and the intimacy of participating in a real encounter. As a consequence we find Beecroft's women, at once more present to us and less accessible than we would wish ... Our anxiety, then, does not arise from the fact that naked women are near to us, but from the unbridgeable, yet ill-defined distance between ourselves and them. It is not the anxiety of desire, but the anxiety of displacement. (Hickey 2000, p.7)

Displacement arises not only from the relation between the viewer and the artwork itself but also in relation to other members of the audience. When presenting sexually evocative work, the context of the gallery (or an art event like the *Art Basel* fair in Miami where 'VB #69' took place) acquires an additional function. Not only does it suggest that objects or situations are there to be contemplated; it also acts as a spatial confinement that forces viewers into a relational situation. They are aware that they are being seen looking at explicit content by other viewers.²⁵ This effect was highlighted by journalist Judith Flanders in a review of the Jeff Koons room at the Tate Modern's 2009 *Pop Life* exhibition, in which much of the artist's sexually explicit *Made in Heaven* series²⁶ was shown:

Galleries are for looking, not for being looked at. And yet with these works, it became very obvious that all the spectators were suddenly aware of being observed: viewees not viewers. ... I actually had to ask myself the question: how do I look at this? Insofar as it disoriented me, and made me reflect, I suppose the works had some value. (Flanders 2009, para.3,6)

Effects of co-surveillance on individuals' 'impression management' are well-studied sociological phenomena²⁷ and an interesting corollary in situations of art-viewing. For those sensitive to it, it practically reverses the 'convivial' merits of relational art by referring viewers back to themselves as individuals in a crowd. In summary, sexually explicit content like disgusting scenes, are likely to thwart retrieval-oriented and psychically distant approaches to art, and it is often the gallery's atmosphere that eventually facilitates/recoups an attitude of reflection.

²⁵ See: chapter two, note 12.

²⁶ 'Made in Heaven' (1989/1990) is a series of paintings, photographs, and sculptures showing Koons and his then-wife, pornographic actress Ilona Staller, in explicit sexual positions.

²⁷ Sociologist Erving Goffman defines impression management as "the way in which the individual ... presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them" (Goffman 1959, preface, n.p.). See also: Tedeschi (1981).

4.4.3 Empathy

Empathy has been defined in many ways and associated with a wide range of emotional states. These include the desire to help other people, feeling ‘into’ another’s emotional state (experiencing the same emotions as someone else), or sharing another’s thoughts (Coplan & Goldie 2011). Cognitive scientist and philosopher Frédérique de Vignemont identified a set of variables that tend to foster empathetic responses. De Vignemont suggested that *salient*, *negative* and *basic* emotions (such as sadness or pain) are easier to share than *weak*, *positive* or *complex* ones (de Vignemont 2007).²⁸ In this vein, art historian David Freedberg and neuro scientist Vittorio Gallese argued that it can be demonstrated that vision of painful touch, as in Caravaggio’s ‘*Incredulity of St Thomas*’ (1601–1602) (Fig. 49), activates the same cortical networks that are activated when we are actually physically touched (Freedberg & Gallese 2007b).²⁹ Empathetic experiences with works of art have received significant attention in the psychology of art.³⁰ In the context of this thesis what exactly characterises such experiences is less important than how they are facilitated by artistic strategies. Tony Oursler’s practice provides an example.

Oursler described his work as “*very related to an exploration of empathy between the viewer and the artwork and almost like setting up a psychological trap*” (Oursler 2012, 2:08min). In fact, viewers respond instinctively to his projected characters whether they evoke humour/pleasant emotions or negative ones. In her blog regarding Oursler’s 1995 ‘*Guilty*’ (a woman’s face projected on a pillow spouting accusatory remarks while being squashed by a mattress; Fig. 50) a viewer wrote: “*I felt kind of bad because I too am guilty of not caring after a while*” (“RaSheena” 2008, para.1). Another viewer even talked back to a similar work (‘*Get Away*’, 1994):

²⁸ For related discussions, see: Fultz et al. (1988), Yamada & Decety (2009).

²⁹ For related discussions of the role of mirror neurons, see: Rizzolatti & Craighero (2004) and Freedberg & Gallese (2007a).

³⁰ See: Lipps (1903), Kris (1952, pp.54–56), Crozier & Greenhalgh (1992), Freedberg & Gallese (2007b).

It's a favorite of mine because of the strident, accusing voice that hollers at us: "What are ya looking at?" I SAID [sic] "What are ya looking at?" It's charming but ironic: the trapped figure that refuses to be observed, or helped, even though he's 'trapped' – what a modern dilemma!

(Williams in Williams & Rapoport 2000, para.36)

Initially the viewer's response was emotional. She talked back to a lifeless object having seemingly lost her distance. Then, in hindsight, meaning is made by interpreting the work as related to a larger social theme.



Fig. 49: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Incredulity of St Thomas*, 1601, oil on canvas, 107 × 146.1 cm.

Neues Palais, Potsdam, Germany. Photo: JarektUploadBot / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain (GNU-FDL PD-old-100)



Fig. 50: Tony Oursler, *Guilty*, 1995, video projector, VCR, videotape, mattress, cloth. Performance by: Tracy Leipold, irregular dimensions (overall approx. 36 x 193 x 316 cm).

Reproduction: Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures

The balance between the emotional stimuli and the appeal to reflection is intermeshed in the material. The artificial source of the viewer's empathy – an often pixelated projection in distorted colours on less than realistically crafted dummy heads or amorphous objects – is still able to evoke robust emotions. It would appear that we have a low threshold with regard to empathetic response. Oursler himself described these works as an *“embodiment of the link between the media and the psychological states it is capable of provoking: empathy, fear, arousal, anger”* (Oursler & Janus 2000, p.75). Even grotesquely distorted faces and individual facial parts (Fig. 44) can evoke empathy, which made critic Edward Colless wonder: *“Why is it so hard to shake the feeling that there's something in there, watching you, like some kind of ghost in the machine?”* (Colless 2012, para.1). Powerless to prevent the emotional response, the visibility of the technology (Oursler's projectors are mostly deliberately exposed)

becomes at the same time a confounder and a facilitator of viewers' response and of any subsequent assessment of that response: "*People have to answer questions*", Oursler said, "*they have to complete the picture*" (Oursler & Janus 2000, p.73). Colles' question stands as testimony to empathy in Oursler's work as an agent for meaning-making.

Some of Oursler's works appeal to reflection through what some scholars refer to as '*cognitive empathy*' (A. Smith 2006). This occurs when empathic emotion and assessment of its cause happen concurrently.³¹ Works like '*Guilty*' or '*Get Away*' entail characters that insult, swear at and accuse the viewer. In such situations, people tend to find it generally difficult, if not impossible to empathise with the interlocutor's emotions; we can at best understand but not share emotions when they are directed at us (de Vignemont 2007). Works operating in this way force the viewer more directly into a reflective (and possibly even defensive) position. Cultural theorist Nikos Papastergiadis regards emotional and intellectual components of empathy as intrinsically related, and described empathetic viewing as ...

... a dynamic process of going closer to be able to see, but also never forgetting where you are coming from ... empathy is about that process of surrender and to learn with the other, but also the catch that transforms your perception.

(Papastergiadis & Zournazi 2002, p.95/96)

Put this way, empathy turns into a form of separative meaning-making: the viewer *examines the emotional situation* s/he has been exposed to and to a greater or lesser degree entered into. This allows viewers to connect with the situation of others, which is the objective of much contemporary art addressing controversial subjects such as sexual abuse, political conflicts, or human atrocities.

The connection between empathetic viewing and the treatment of traumatic experiences by contemporary artists was examined by cultural theorist Jill Bennett (2005).³² Bennett sees the basis of empathy not as grounded in "*feeling for another insofar as we imagine being that other*" but rather as "*a feeling for*

³¹ From an evolutionary perspective, the shift to an analytic position is healthy in order not to become paralysed by another's distress and, for example, to engage in helping behaviour (Decety & Jackson 2006).

³² Bennett's examples include works by Dennis Del Favero, Sandra Johnston, Doris Salcedo, William Kentridge, Willie Doherty, Jo Ractcliffe, Gavin Young, Paul Seawright and Gordon Bennett.

another that entails an encounter with something irreducible and different, often inaccessible" (Bennett 2005, p.10). In the context of this thesis this is an interesting trajectory as it carries the concept of empathy from 'feeling into' an individual person to trying to 'get a hunch' of what, as Rancière said, eventually *'resists signification'*. It expands the idea that art can give form to existential themes and allow for the audience to constitute and retain new emotional qualities. Bennett's approach suggests that even other people's existential themes can be *touched*⁶³ by viewers as they compare a depicted or otherwise thematised situation with their own. Going beyond the emotional side of empathy, Bennett stressed that artists *"exploit forms of embodied perception in order to promote forms of critical inquiry"* (Bennett 2005, p.10). By evoking emotions, it is possible for a more profound engagement with the work's subject matter to be forged, thus appealing to empathy becomes a *"manner of doing politics"* (Bennett 2005, p.152). An example of this is the viewer who links Oursler's trapped but help-refusing figure to a *'modern dilemma'*, another is Celia Shapiro's *'John William Rook - 09/19/86'* (Fig. 13) and also Alfredo Jaar's *'The Eyes of Gutete Emerita'* which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

In summary, the psycho-physiological effect of experiencing the same emotions that one is observing in others as well as relating other peoples' destiny to one's own life can be powerful tools to facilitate meaning-making. This is so because, first, empathetic emotions (like disgust and sexual arousal), are triggered instinctively and supersede usual modes of art interpretation, and second, because emotional empathy is often paired with the desire to better understand the other's and/or one's own situation on an intellectual level.

4.5 Conclusion

To facilitate response to one's own artwork has clear limitations. Efforts to orchestrate a work's reception can run counter to the intuitive creative process, plus, the artist has to consider a significant number of contextual factors, many of which are beyond her/his influence. However, to convey two kinds of

³³ In the same vein, Thomas Hirschhorn stated: *"I always ask myself: Does my work have the ability to generate an event? Can I encounter someone with my work? And am I – through my work – trying to touch something? Can something – through my work – be touched?"* (Hirschhorn 2009, p.76).

information: the *repertoire* and the *appeal to open-ended meaning-making*, is in the interest of artists *addressing political, social, environmental, or cultural issues and/or referring viewers back to themselves (as viewers)*. The appeal to open-ended meaning-making is described as an *modal intention* and as such distinct from *semantic intentions*, which pertain to a work's 'message'. With this distinction, the paradox that artists cannot hold up as an intention that viewers do not look for their intentions is remediated.

If (a) it is an artist's intention that a work is open to diverse responses (conditioned only by the repertoire, within a '*particular field of possibilities*') and (b) such open works are in danger of remaining altogether incomprehensible (as Eco and Danto observed), it becomes a structural necessity that the viewer's understanding of the work's repertoire and the artist's wish to engage the viewer in meaning-making are not left to chance. This task can be approached in two ways: artists can interfere with the context within which their work is apprehended, or anchor relevant information in the work itself. Examples of contextual strategies are the provision of titles, talks and statements of various kinds. Such measures will often be especially helpful to facilitate the repertoire's understanding. Engaging the viewer in separative meaning-making (to *insinuate* or *suggest* the work's 'open' character) has been exemplified by strategies that foster the suspension of retrieval-oriented art assessment schemata by initially emotion-dominated responses.

Despite individual differences, some biologically or culturally rooted triggers can facilitate shifts in the mode of the viewer's apprehension with some degree of predictability. Examples of often-used triggers are the evocation of disgust, sexual attraction, and appeals to empathy. However, if the viewer's participation in meaning-making is desired, viewers must not get fully absorbed by their emotional response. A counterbalance is needed. In some cases (for example Beecroft's models or Oursler's projections) this counterbalance is inherent to the object that first disrupted the art-contemplation mode, but it only reveals itself through reflection. In others, it is constituted by a physically separate element of the same work, as for example, a textual supplement. A third component is the work's presentation in a gallery context where it is expected that the displayed objects and situations are there to be thought about and which will sooner or later come back to awareness when the effect of the 'emotional ambush' ceases.

CHAPTER FIVE: MEANING-MAKING AND ARTISTIC MEDIA – SOME EXAMPLES

I do go through a sort of continuous process of 'imagining the viewer'. I think all artists, in the process of making a work, hypothesize the audience, invent an imaginary audience which is exactly the one which will appreciate that work profoundly.

Jeff Wall, 1990¹

The preceding two chapters took theoretical issues as points of departure and used specific artworks as examples. This chapter reverses this approach by analysing artistic practices in terms of their relation to separative meaning-making. The discussion includes Alfredo Jaar's *'The Eyes of Gutete Emerita'* (1996), Tony Oursler's already introduced projection technique, *'Superflex'* work *'The Financial Crisis'* (2009), and Tino Sehgal's live *'interpreters'* that engage gallery visitors in conversations. I am using these practices as exemplars because the artworks are designed to elucidate meaning-making. Finally, I draw on my own practice to show how the theory of meaning-making as defined in this thesis can be used to assess an artwork's likeliness to elicit meaning-making responses.

5.1 Alfredo Jaar's *'The Eyes of Gutete Emerita'*

Alfredo Jaar's *'The Eyes of Gutete Emerita'* (1996) unites a variety of strategies to engage the viewer in the meaning-making process. There are several versions of this work but they all comprise two main elements: a transparency of two eyes (or two transparencies showing one eye each) and a 150-word piece of text. The two eyes are either displayed next to each other and fixed on individual, backlit light boxes (Fig. 51a), or as a single slide copied 100,000 times, displayed on a large light table (Fig. 51c,d). The text is presented as a narrow brightly glowing line of text in small letters (Fig. 51e), as a series of six alternating transparencies (Fig. 51b) or as a plain inscription on the gallery wall. It tells the story of *Gutete Emerita*, a woman whose husband

¹ In: Harrison & Wood (2006, p.1159)

and sons were murdered in front of her eyes in a 1994 Rwanda massacre. The text begins by recounting in sober, impersonal style that “Over a five month period in 1994, more than one million Rwandans, mostly members of the Tutsi minority, were systematically slaughtered as the world closed its eyes to genocide” and ends by emphasizing the strong personal impact that the eyes of the witness (whom Jaar met and interviewed in Rwanda) made on the artist.

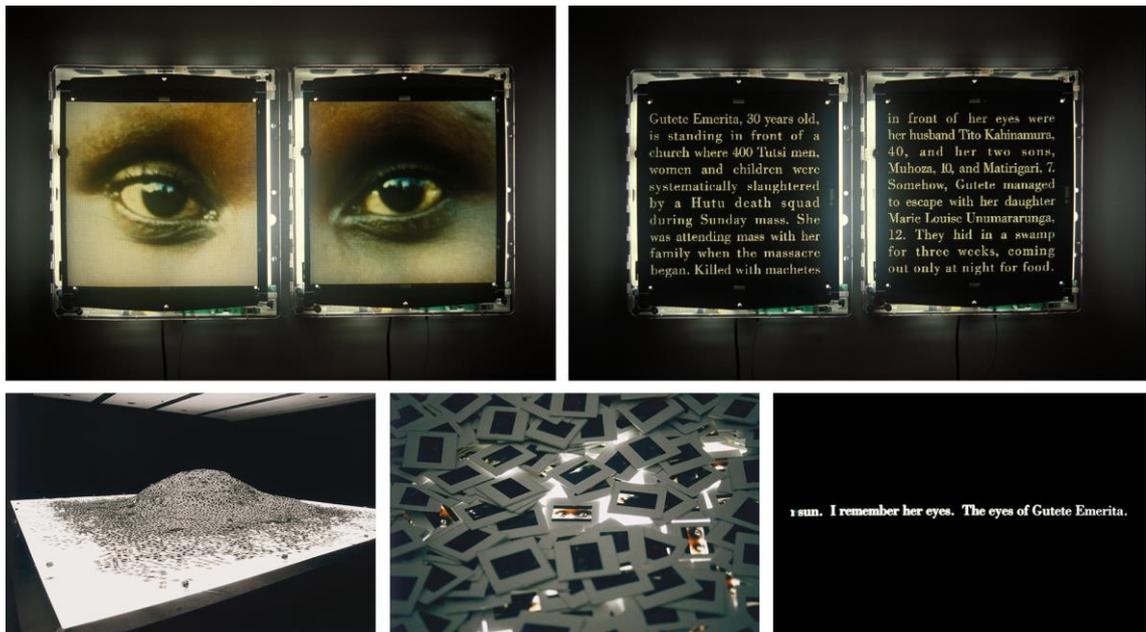


Fig. 51: Alfredo Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, 1996.

Top row (51 a + b; 'light box version'): two quad vision light boxes with six black-and-white text transparencies and two colour transparencies, overall: 66.5 x 127.5 x 15.5 cm.

Bottom row (51 c-e; 'slide table version'): 100,000 slides, light table, magnifiers and illuminated wall text, table: 550.5 x 363.2 x 91.4 cm, text: 457.2 x 15.2 cm.

Courtesy of the artist. Photos: alfredojaar.net

In a review of this work, Jacques Rancière wrote:

[F]or all that they have seen, these eyes do not tell us what Gutete Emerita thinks and feels. They are the eyes of someone endowed with the same power as those who view them, but also with the same power that her brothers and sisters have been deprived of by the murders ... (Rancière 2009, p.97/98)

The viewer is not overwhelmed by a 'spectacle' of dead bodies, but prompted to contemplate the “construction of the victim as an element in a certain distribution of the visible” (Rancière 2009, p.99)². Jaar's work combines addressing political and social issues with an appeal to meaning-making in

² The “distribution of the visible” is Rancière's formula for habitual ways of seeing as well as the selection and presentation of images by various parties (media, advertising, etc.).

leaving the viewer, as art historian Griselda Pollock explains, “*with some heavy, unresolved, and challenging questions about our involvement in [its] conundrum*” (Pollock 2007, p.121). The conundrum arises from a major blank: what Gutete Emerita saw and experienced, and even in what situation she is now as a survivor, is not and cannot be depicted; this is left instead to the viewer’s imagination, which is initiated by the woman’s gaze:

First and foremost it is that gaze ... for all that it has seen the massacre, does not reconstitute its perception of it for us. We may know what she has seen. We do not know what she thinks.

(Rancière 2007a, p.76)

Jaar carefully orchestrates this gaze. The viewer is presented with a cropped section of a face, backlit in a dark environment. Eyes and gaze are stimuli that we are conditioned to attend to closely and spontaneously³ and their impact is further enhanced by the theatrical mode of presentation. It may be argued that the viewer might turn to the text first before seeing the eyes (Rancière 2009, p.98), but the text fosters a similar response. In a confusing situation, people quickly turn to text to find explanations and orientation. In the dark environment the text itself is a source of light, which captures the viewer’s attention. Jaar’s strategy thus appeals to biologically and culturally conditioned response schemata, which are then coupled with reflection-invoking information.

Several authors have addressed the relationship between photographic and textual representation and the issue of representational limits as a key theme in Jaar’s work (Rancière 2007a; 2009; Pollock 2007; Levan 2011). Arguably, for exhibition visitors, such discursive dimensions only come to the fore after contemplating their own direct encounter. Once viewers know whom they are facing, they confront “*an impossible meeting with eyes ... that look at you but see murder ... as they look upon an invisible scene burned onto her retina from the inside*” (Pollock 2007, p.127). They might then ask questions like: ‘What could, or should, I see seeing these eyes?’ or ‘Can I ever empathise with this person?’ Such questions will usually precede more general, intellectual and contextual considerations.

³ For an overview of relevant research, see Itier et al. (Itier et al. 2007, pp.1019–1020).

Having presented ('illuminated') the work's subject matter and provided orientation in the dark, the text's principle functions are complete and the work's negation strategy can gain traction. This includes questions like whether/how texts (or photographs) can accurately depict atrocities, or what is needed to truly engage consumers numbed by media images⁴ to empathise and change their lives. Norms are not rejected *per se*:

The problem does not lie in criticizing television messages, it lies in creating other spatiotemporal arrangements, in opposing to the dominant light box other light boxes, where the text and images pass through the same channel, where the words are no longer spoken by a voice, but arranged like a poem on the screen... (Rancière 2007a, p.79)

In other words, by questioning the limits of representation and documentation, Jaar's installation ultimately turns meaning-making towards meaning-making. Jaar employs a variety of methods introduced in previous chapters: information is 'blacked out', the viewer is addressed by a direct gaze and provided with textual guidance. The emotional-cognitive interplay orchestrated by Jaar strongly relies on the viewer's '*empathetic vision*': an attempt to touch another person's (and by extension that of thousands of others) '*existential theme*'. The fact that such attempts are usually doomed to failure given the difference between the world of the Western art viewer and that of the African civil war survivor challenges the viewer's intellectual response.

The effective arrangement notwithstanding, Jaar's strategy eventually turns against itself. Reflective viewers will recognise themselves as being amidst a *mise-en-scène* that suspiciously resembles the '*dominant light boxes*' the work opposes. Victor Burgin held exactly this against Jaar's work and against Rancière's positive critique, arguing that in "*its own spectacular theatricality the apparatus of Jaar's work parallels that of mainstream cinema*" (Burgin 2011, p.153). Burgin went on to criticise "*the spectacular form of its presentation in gallery installations, where his theatrically lit display strategies recall and rival those of luxury boutiques and bars*" (Burgin 2011, p.153). Rancière has indeed cautioned against exhibitions "*that want to make viewers 'active' at all costs with the help of various gadgets borrowed from advertising*" (Rancière et al. 2007,

⁴ Pollock asked: "*The viewer is shielded from what she witnessed 'as an image' (if shown as a news image, would it not be iconized and thus be commodified?). But in meeting these eyes and what they, unshown, reveal she has seen, might this moment sear the soul of the viewer also to remember...?*" (Pollock 2007, p.127)

p.258) and his appraisal of Jaar's work would seem to contradict his own position. Jaar himself is aware of this problem:

As an artist and architect, everything I do is to facilitate the reading of the work ... [T]he theatrics of a project ... respond to the needs of the piece to communicate specific ideas. I hope that any theatricality is understood as just one element in the language that I need to communicate an idea. I am sure that I sometimes fall into an excess or suppression of the theatrical. ... You always walk a fine line between excess and constraint. (Jaar & Phillips 2005, p.26)

Jaar may be criticised for over-stressing the objective of 'communicating an idea' and going beyond what is needed to establish the work's repertoire; however, his installation highlights the field of tension between the work's semantic intentions and the openness that situates separative meaning-making and which artists interested in this kind of response must balance out.

5.2 Challenging Art Assessment Schemata with Video: Tony Oursler and Superflex

A certain 'theatricality' is inherent to many artistic strategies, particularly those employing cinematic techniques. Tony Oursler's objects are often the only source of movement and light in an otherwise static environment (Fig. 52). The unanticipated appearance and motion of luminous objects are environmental features that, like eyes, we are conditioned to pay attention to (Yantis &



Fig. 52: Tony Oursler, *Million Miles (Orbital Screw)*, 2007, fibreglass sculpture, video projection, loud speakers, performance by: Constance De Jong, 122 x 168 x 76 cm.

Exhibition shown: *Mirada Pisante*, El Tanque Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Canary Islands (2008). Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures. Photo: tonyoursler.com

Jonides 1984; Brockmole & Henderson 2005), as is the change of an object's colour (Matsukura et al. 2009). Viewers experience both with much video art. In busy art exhibitions however, people are exposed to a multitude of moving

stimuli, and are often engaged in demanding tasks like interpretation that mitigate the effect (Simons 2000). It is partly for this reason that most video art is housed in separate, darkened, and often purpose-built rooms. These environments can invite, as art theorist Tiffany Sutton argued, ...

... a proprioceptive comparison of the visitor's body and mode of regard with bodies and modes of regard represented in the display, thus occasioning an immersive experience of bodily self-in-relation.

(Sutton 2005, para.25)

In Oursler's and Jaar's installations, this effect enforces an empathetic response; it blocks out distractions and focuses attention on the relation between the viewer and the characters in the display.

When moving images are used, accompanying sound often adds a decisive dimension to the illusive effect. The fact that the words we hear are not from the dummies' mouths is something that evolution has not prepared us for (Anderson 1998, p.84). Perceiving coherent, synchronic information via various senses helps validate our perceptions (Smith et al. 2012). Conversely, when perceptual information is incoherent the suspension of disbelief disappears.⁵ Technology that is capable of reproducing multi-sensory, 'realistic' perceptual information thus lends itself to immersive effect and to transcending '*psychical distance*'. However, it also reflects the same problems with regard to facilitating meaning-making discussed in connection with strong emotional stimuli (see 4.4): since an overly captivating effect is eventually incompatible with meaning-making, a counterbalance is required to recoup a reflective attitude. In most situations, a given set of circumstances – the size of the image, its lack of three dimensionality, the context in which it is seen, etc. – work against sustained immersion. Also, we can assume that contemporary viewers are accustomed to cinematic displays and thus capable of maintaining a certain distance. Even if realistic cinema does make people scream, cry, empathise, turn away or cover their eyes, it usually does not make them run away or get up to help a person suffering on the screen.

Distancing effects can also be carefully orchestrated, as in Oursler's display of technical equipment. More common methods include editing

⁵ Bruce Nauman's video '*Lip Sync*' (1969) thematises this effect: The work shows a close-up of the artist's mouth turned upside-down, repeating the words "*lip sync*". As he speaks the sound-track shifts out of, and back into, sync with the image.

techniques, camera handling (Branigan 2006, chap.five), and the screenplay itself (for example, the concept of '*alienation effect*' derived from Bertolt Brecht's theatre theory, see (Féral 1987)) to name just a few. An example that dramatises the interplay of involving and distancing viewers is '*The Financial Crisis*' (2009) (Fig. 53), a video installation by the artist collective *Superflex*. When exhibited, the 14-minute video is usually presented in a large box-type room with seating spaces.⁶ On their website, *Superflex* describe the work as addressing "*the financial crisis and meltdown from a therapeutic perspective*":

A hypnotist guides us through our worst nightmares to reveal the crisis without as the psychosis within. During 4 sessions you will experience the fascination of speculation and power, fear, anxiety and frustration of losing control, economic loss and personal disaster. (Superflex 2009, para.1)

Each session begins with an instruction to close one's eyes, followed by a description of various scenarios. One such scenario involves operating an invisible hand that safely guides other people's actions, but the viewer gradually loses control over it. Another session prompts the audience to imagine losing a perfect job and all the material security it brings. Each session is ended by the spell-breaking snap of a finger and the instruction to wake up feeling comfortable, fresh and happy.

At once involving and distancing are situations in which narrators or actors turn to the viewer and address her/him directly in the second person voice (Auter & Davis 1991). This is a key feature in the works of both *Superflex* and Oursler. The cinematic hypnotist talks to the audience face to face, telling



Fig. 53: *Superflex, The Financial Crisis*, 2009, video installation, 14 min.

Exhibition shown: *It's the Political Economy, Stupid*, Pori Art Museum (2013). Photo (museum press release): Erkki Valli-Jaakola. Courtesy of the artists (©)

⁶ The work was also broadcasted on British television (Channel 4, October 12-15, 2009 as part of the *3 Minute Wonder* series) and is available from *Superflex'* homepage www.superflex.net

viewers to close their eyes, imagine various situations, and wake up on command. They are prompted to respond to a mediated, two-dimensional authority and will often do so, but at the same time viewers are challenged to decide whether they indeed want to obey instructions given by a disembodied character (a work of art, an anonymous, absent person, etc.) and often in a setting where others may be watching.

The strategies of Oursler and Superflex place particular emphasis on what may be called '*suture*'. This film theoretical term is normally used to describe techniques that draw (or '*suture*') viewers into a cinematic story world, letting them forget their role as spectators (Lapsley & Westlake 2006, pp.86–90). However, suture also describes those processes and cinematic techniques that remind viewers of that very role (Oudart 1969; 1978; Dayan 1974). Similar processes and techniques were discussed in 4.4 with regard to a 'return' from an emotion-dominated response to a reflective attitude. According to the suture concept this development is predetermined and controlled by the filmmaker/author. Social scientist Daniel Dayan defined the system of suture as having "*the function of transforming a vision or seeing of the film into a reading of it*" (Dayan 1974, p.29). When attention shifts to a film's technical aspects and its *mise-en-scène*, questions arise as to "*why the frame is what it is*" (Dayan 1974, p.29).⁷ To realise that one's own gaze is in fact that of another also encourages meaning-making in retrieval mode. In many films the viewer assumes the point of view ('*POV shot*' in film theory) of a diegetic character, looking through her or his eyes. The illusion is suspended as soon as this character is seen from the outside or when one suddenly takes the point of view of another character.⁸ This rupture of the illusion can turn the spectator to the intentions of the 'real owner' of the gaze: the one behind the camera, the director, "*the haunting presence of the Absent One*", as film theorist Jean-Pierre Oudart said (Oudart 1978, p.41). So in principal, the effect of "*flip-flopping in and out of the illusion*" (Allen 1993, p.39) makes video a particularly powerful

⁷ Dayan elaborated: "*The spectator discovers that his possession of space was only partial, illusory. He feels dispossessed of what he is prevented from seeing. He discovers that he is only authorized to see what happens to be in the axis of the glance of another spectator, who is ghostly or absent*" (Dayan 1974, p.29).

⁸ A classical example would be the shot/reverse shot technique in which the spectator follows alternately the gaze of two people in conversation, hence being in a position impossible to adopt in real life (Oudart 1969; 1978; Dayan 1974). For a summary of the concept of suture, see: Lapsley and Westlake (2006, pp.86–90).

medium to suspend art assessment schemata, but also to recoup an attitude of assessment.

If separative meaning-making is the objective, the described effect must be organised in a way that encourages a mode of assessment that goes beyond retrieval. The video installations of Oursler and Superflex do not lead viewers into and out of the perspective of diegetic characters, but instead prompt them to behave idiosyncratically from the start. Oursler enhances proprioceptive experiences by encouraging the audience to move around in his installations. The *'frame'* that viewers might wonder *'why it is what it is'* includes themselves as viewers. Moreover, some of Oursler's characters directly address the viewer prompting her/his response. The viewer is not made to slip into the guise of another person, but is rather cast into alternating roles of an addressed opposite and a self-observer.

The strategy is carried to extremes in *'The Financial Crisis'*. Arguably, few viewer/participants will effectively be hypnotised. They are led through a brief, slightly tongue-in-cheek, period of meditation. *Whilst* apprehending the work, the participant's attention is focussed on conjuring up images in the mind; *after* this experience, the 'treatment' can, as *Superflex* member Jakob Fenger anticipates, cause us *"to look upon ourselves and look upon how we have decided to live in this world"* (Bui et al. 2010, para.69).⁹ In *'The Financial Crisis'* as with Oursler's chatty dummies, the suturing devices promote the *'strange halfway position'* that Iser described: viewers are both involved and prompted to watch themselves being involved.

Oursler, Superflex, Jaar and many other artists employ theatrical techniques that first aim to immerse viewers, and then disrupt this effect to make them aware of their role as perceiving or interacting subjects. In the discussed examples, the artwork ultimately asserts viewers' *'psychical distance'* by remaining static and unable to adjust to their response. Some artists have created work that attacks this safe distance by organising encounters with actors that entangle the viewer in a complex set of interactions. An example already discussed is Valie Export's *'Tap and Touch Cinema'* (Fig. 24); another

⁹ The work's repertoire warrants reflections, for example, on the conflation of internal and external, subjective and objective, imagined and real elements of the crisis as well as offering a metaphor for the hypnotic effect of the media.

one is Pedro Reyes' project *'Sanatorium'* (Fig. 54), first performed in 2011.¹⁰ The work consists of a multi-room installation simulating a clinic including a reception and various consulting rooms. Upon arrival, visitors are requested to register as 'patients' before being interviewed by a receptionist and assigned therapeutic treatments.¹¹ For each 'treatment' – a “*game that will help to see your situation in a different light*” (Reyes & Designindaba 2013, 4:43min) – the visitor is led to a 'consulting room' where s/he is encouraged to playfully work

on a pressing theme or momentary conflict with a performer who has been briefed on simple therapeutic techniques. In exploring intersections between psychology and art as means to make people more aware of themselves Reyes' strategy is similar to that of Oursler and Superflex. However, Reyes' use of live actors makes it much more difficult for *viewers* to withdraw once

they decided to become *participants*. In a sense, this may be seen as an artistic answer to the human instinct of escape or self-withdrawal that Pelowski and Akiba identified in connection to art apprehension (see: 4.4, p.118). Working with performers that interact with the audience is also the signature strategy of Tino Seghal, which is considered in more detail in the following section.



Fig. 54: Pedro Reyes, *Sanatorium*, first shown 2011, participatory project and installation. Here (2012): Performer and participant in 'therapeutic session' (*'Philosophical Casino'*).

Exhibition shown: Documenta XIII (2012), Kassel. Courtesy of the artist and Documenta. Photo: Matt Keyworth (©)

¹⁰ Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2011; also shown at the 2012 Documenta and London's Whitechapel Gallery in 2013.

¹¹ Reyes' website describes these 'therapies' as a “*variations or mash ups of existing schools such as Gestalt psychology, theatre warm-up exercises, fluxus events, conflict resolution techniques, trust-building games, corporate coaching, psychodrama, and hypnosis*” (Reyes 2013, para.3).

5.3 The Viewer as Actor: Tino Sehgal's Conversational Works

In many of his works, Tino Sehgal has people (usually lay performers whom he calls *'interpreters'*) approach and instigate discussions with audience members. In his *'This Situation'*, first performed in 2007, museum visitors face a group of six interpreters engaged in a debate on philosophical issues. Occasionally one of them would turn around and prompt a response from audience members asking: *'Or what do you think?'* In *'These Associations'* (2012), performed at the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, the visitor entered a crowd of about 70 people of different ages and occupations, one of whom would approach and ask her/him to share a personal experience or memory. For *'This Progress'* (2006/2010) visitors were engaged in a conversation about the concept of progress whilst walking through the museum. When performed at New York's Guggenheim museum, individual visitors were first welcomed by a child who started the conversation while accompanying them up the museum's spiral gallery ramp. Here they were passed on to a high school student. Yet further up, the viewer was passed onto a young adult, and finally an elderly person before reaching the top of the spiral.

Like facing Beecroft's models, the viewer in these works is *"confronted with him- or herself, with his or her own presence in the situation"* but the meaning-making position s/he is led to adopt is a very different one (Sehgal in Sehgal & Griffin 2005, p.219). In a sense, Sehgal's interpreters are the opposite of Beecroft's: the latter's chilly manners enforce one's awareness of being a part of the *context*, whereas the former's proactive behaviour turns viewers into participants who become part of the work itself.

Sehgal appreciates tourist visitors because they are, as he says, *"more open"* and *"ready to experience something not necessarily art-related"* (Sehgal & Thatcher 2012, p.3). However, many viewers may have some idea of what awaits them since Sehgal's works feature prominently at international art events and in the media. The 'artist's name' will thus often impede *'the free manipulation'* of the work (compare 4.3.1, p. 110). Apart from giving interviews, Sehgal interferes with general viewing habits and the contextualisation of his work by prohibiting photography. The (intended)¹² absence of imagery

¹² Unauthorised images of Sehgal's works are nevertheless proliferated on the Internet.

underpins the uniqueness of the viewer's personal encounter, and the fact that a conversation can survive only in memory and as a topic of conversation itself.

Sehgal has often claimed that his work needs to be framed as art (Sehgal & Lubow 2010; Sehgal & Obrist 2012; Sehgal & Thatcher 2012). If his interpreters approached passers-by in the street for example, any reflective appeal would be jeopardised by the public's general suspicion of strangers, especially when asked philosophical questions or to share personal experiences. What is missing in everyday experience is the "*facilitating framework for contemplating an aspect of experience*" (Sutton 2005, para.19). One has to categorise the experience somehow, Sehgal explained, "*because obviously your eyes are telling you: 'I have seen something', and your brain has to say: 'what is this something?'*" and the institutional context can provide the necessary framework (Sehgal & Sgualdini 2005, para.17).

The gallery's '*atmosphere of theory*' channels the viewer's meaning-making *per se*, but Sehgal also manipulates this context. Typically, the artist has it cleared from all other artwork so that the only tangible cause left for reflection is the communicative situation that the viewer becomes a part of. The viewer is, Sehgal said, to experience the museum as a place of "*legitimate and official culture that now evolves around her/him, around what s/he thinks*" (Sehgal & Obrist 2012, p.60, my translation). Apart from shaping the context of his work, Sehgal also shapes, to an extent, the encounter between visitors and interpreters. The latter are instructed to avoid both small talk and discussions about the piece itself (Sehgal & Thatcher 2012), and to employ "*a kind of prologue, which seduces the viewer into saying something*" (Sehgal & Sgualdini 2005, para.48). Sehgal's strategy is thus an ideal example of the Open Work:

[A]t the end of the interpretative dialogue, a form which is his [the artist's] form will have been organized, even though it may have been assembled by an outside party in a particular way that he could not have foreseen. The author is the one who proposed a number of possibilities which had already been rationally organized, oriented, and endowed with specifications for proper development ...

(Eco 1989 [1962], p.19)

Despite the constraints that Sehgal imposes there is a lot of freedom in his constructed situations. The key component of their openness is the unpredictability of individual conversations. For the interpreter as for the visitor,

the conversation with a stranger is a challenge and a motor of meaning-making. Conversations proffer new ideas, test established views, make tacit knowledge explicit, and assimilate experiences. These are typical effects of conversations in general (Baker et al. 2002, chap.1,4 and 7; Sachs 1987), but they are intensified when talking to a stranger. Such encounters are especially demanding since people have to deal with a high degree of uncertainty and manage anxiety (Ball-Rokeach 1973; Berger & Calabrese 1975). Communication theorists Charles R. Berger and Richard J. Calabrese named typical variables of the uncertainty involved in conversations with strangers, many of which parallel processes of art apprehension. These are: seeking information, reward value of conversational partners (insights gained from artworks), the degree to which their behaviour (or the art's form and content) matches normative expectations, and the likeliness of future interaction (Berger & Calabrese 1975). Sehgal's conversational situations expand these typical features by what Berger and Calabrese identified as '*intimacy of self-disclosure*' and the potential attraction of the stranger (Berger & Calabrese 1975).

Sociologists have also hinted at people's desire to have a '*definition of the situation*', which can be defined as a mutual agreement on the nature of the interaction that is appropriate (Goffman 1959; Thomas 2002). To establish a situational definition participants must agree on the interaction's social context and their own identities, respectively the roles in which they see themselves. Viewers' self-assessment was previously discussed with regard to sexually explicit displays (see 4.4.2), and this can be seen as part of the struggle to achieve a situational definition. Situations like those instigated by Sehgal (where oppositional feed-back is guaranteed) augment the challenge to monitor and facilitate the way one is perceived and perceives oneself. This is exemplified by author Zoe Weil's description of her encounter with '*This Progress*' as follows:

*It was interesting to observe my own style as a visitor.
... I found myself in a bit of a teaching mode with the
child and 20-something but with the older person, I
shifted into an equal sharing of thoughts and ideas
and basic human information exchange, learning and
stretching through the interactions. This 'exhibit'
offered me a surprising mirror into myself.*

(Weil 2010, para.8)

In a review of the same work, art historian Gillian Sneed remembered:

As a woman of 30, I was aware of my shifting roles as I progressed along the ramp. I transitioned from a protective caretaker to a mentor to a protégée in the matter of 10 minutes. (Sneed 2010, para.10)

A third viewer, art critic Holland Cotter, recounted his experience with the work asking: “*Why, I began to wonder as I walked and talked and listened, had I answered Giuliana’s [one of the interpreters] question as I did? What would I say if I were asked again?*” (Cotter 2010, para.26). The three testimonials affirm the capacity of Sehgal’s conversational prompts to *turn viewers/participants back to themselves*. The artist tests the viewer’s readiness to confront dissonance and maintain ‘*psychical distance*’.¹³ If uncertainty is what many people seek when visiting an art exhibition, Sehgal twists and intensifies this challenge. Yet once initial difficulties are overcome, the experience can become relaxed. Sehgal himself used the example of meeting a stranger on a train to whom one can “*always say more*” because s/he is not a part of one’s own life (Sehgal & Thatcher 2012, p.2).

The afore discussed trajectory from a more emotional to a more intellectual attitude is also characteristic of Sehgal’s constructed situations. Despite their intellectual merits (discussing and reflecting), these works are also an emotionally challenging experience. Sehgal couples a socially conditioned stimulus (conversational prompt) and associated response behaviour – ‘give an answer’, ‘try to understand’, ‘be polite’, ... – with an appeal to contemplate one’s own behaviour and the topic provided.¹⁴ Weil’s account confirms this:

Tino Sehgal offered me an opportunity to connect with others, explore ideas, self-reflect, and consider the concept of progress. I was a co-creator of the art, and the product wasn’t just the discussion but also the lingering aftermath of new ideas and questions and connection with people who had been strangers until we had taken the time, in this unstructured, yet structured way, to simply talk. (Weil 2010, para.11)

Beyond such encounters, Sehgal’s works can raise more general questions about, for example, the boundary between real-life and enactment, the

¹³ One of Sehgal’s interpreters reported in an interview that museum visitors are “*not always relaxed about being approached by chatty strangers*” and “*say something like ‘I think we’re here for the art’*” (Desantis 2010, para.22). Such responses document how deeply rooted and resistant art assessment schemata can be.

¹⁴ In Reyes ‘*Sanatorium*’ the self-reflexive element is yet enhanced as he lets the participant provide the theme of reflection.

intertwining of private and public realms, or what constitutes the ‘work’ in these ephemeral situations. Related reflections will be undertaken mainly by observers assessing the work from a distance or in hindsight. Talking to interpreters absorbs the *participant’s* attention to an extent that makes a simultaneous interpretation of the work very difficult. This highlights the temporal aspect of meaning-making that was already observed in connection with Superflex’ *The Financial Crisis* and the viewer’s response to Oursler’s *Get Away*. On the one hand, meaning can arise out of the immediate experience as it inspires reflection, on the other it may result from retrospective interpretation. Since Sehgal forcefully challenges participants’ distance, it will often only be in hindsight that meaning, in a broader, ‘political’ sense, can be made.

5.4 Theory in Practice: ‘Base 211’

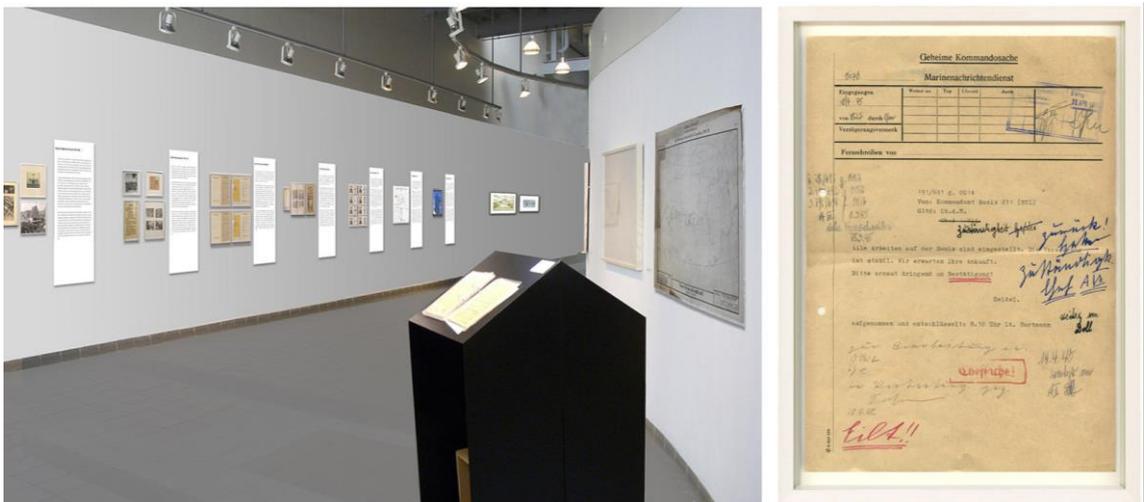


Fig. 55 a + b (exhibition simulation and detail): Jörg Jozwiak and Claudia Antonius, *Base 211*, 2012/13, ten text panels, framed photographs and documents, maps, video, various objects, dimensions flexible.

The preceding sections include various examples how the ‘work of art’, in Dewey’s procedural sense and as far as it concerns the viewer’s meaning-making, can be illuminated through the lenses of other disciplines. This is interesting and perhaps useful to theoretically account for existing works, but how useful are such ‘lenses’ for artists themselves? One can imagine that they are indeed conducive to their work considering that artists are “*looking for universal triggers*” (Hirst), “*go through a sort of continuous process of ‘imagining the viewer’*” (Wall) and “*want people to leave thinking that they must reposition*

themselves in relation to what is being dealt with” (Tiravanija). However, the artist’s job may be regarded as taking a distinctly alternative approach to the ‘*distribution of the sensible*’ – one that remains independent from other domains’ modes of describing or framing ‘reality’.

To acknowledge that artists tackle and express subject matter in unique ways is important, but this does not mean that knowledge from other disciplines is arbitrary within the domain of art. Cross-disciplinary knowledge does not *substitute* artistic intuition, it *adds* to it. Artists observe (and perhaps ‘feel’) where existing descriptions of the world are weak and in need of improvement, and the intuitive nature of creative practice is undisputed here. However, when existing knowledge can be related to an artwork’s subject matter or an artist’s methods it can provide additional inspiration. Critic and curator Robert Storr pointed out that “[s]ome artists have derived a lot from their theoretical reading” and added, that not many do so “as systematically as people are inclined to think” (Storr & Stoilas 2009, para.3). Storr used Felix Gonzalez-Torres as an example as he “read theory carefully, nonetheless made a point of saying that it was not to be read in a kind of rigorous, academic way, but to help unblock thoughts and open up questions” (Storr & Stoilas 2009, para.3).¹⁵ Because artists often address the same topics as professionals from other disciplines, scientists, psychotherapists, and journalists for example, Nicolas Bourriaud rightly observed that:

The contemporary artwork does not rightfully occupy a position in a field, but presents itself as an object of negotiation, caught up in a cross-border trade which confronts different disciplines, traditions or concepts.
(Bourriaud 2009b, p.32)

In such a situation, cross-disciplinary knowledge can only make a work more nuanced or varied, and contribute to the artist’s competence to comment on the world we live in. Disciplinary knowledge from other fields also has potential utility when it comes to assessing one’s own work, and bringing complementary theories to one’s own practice can afford new perspectives on how it is likely to

¹⁵ Gonzalez-Torres himself explained that without the influence of Barthes, Foucault, Borges, and others, he wouldn’t have been able to conceive certain pieces, or arrive at some positions: “Some of their writings and ideas gave me a certain freedom to see. These ideas moved me to a place of pleasure through knowledge and some understanding of the way reality is constructed, of the way the self is formed in culture, of the way language sets traps ...” (González-Torres et al. 1993, para.8). In the vein of a meaning-making theory, Gonzales-Torres concludes: “I want you, the viewer, to be intellectually challenged, moved, and informed” (González-Torres et al. 1993, para.8).

be apprehended. To demonstrate this, one of the artworks created as part of the practice element of this study is assessed below.

'*Base 211*' (Fig. 55) is a multi media exhibition proposal conceived in collaboration with artist Claudia Antonius. The work deals with the myth and conspiracy theory that the Nazis built a secret underground base in Antarctica, where many survived long after World War II. The myth, which was originally spread by post-war tabloids, has seen a revival in recent years and has proliferated on the Internet. For '*Base 211*', the myth was re-edited and partially re-written. Drawing on existing conspiracy theories, the work balances on the borderline between what one can believe and what one can no longer believe. The objects on display combine genuine (but re-contextualised) and false documents such as photos, official and private letters, maps, and sketches. Successive information panels guide the viewer through the exhibition. As viewers proceed, they confront an increasingly grotesque narrative beginning with an authentic Nazi-led Antarctic expedition, and ending with the abandonment and demolition of the secret facility.

No cross-disciplinary theory was drawn on when developing the idea and producing many of the work's components. These stages were guided by the fascination with an absurd story and its exploitation by hoaxers, neo-Nazis and conspiracy theorists. Material was gathered from Internet blogs and websites and the historical texts in which the myth first appeared. We then playfully re-arranged the story and stripped it of the most obviously nonsensical aspects such as UFO engineering on the base and Hitler's survival in Antarctica.

Our modal intention has been to *turn viewers back to themselves* in that they get into a position of questioning what they believe and where they begin to doubt. It was important to conceive the work in such a way that it would not *immediately* be regarded as fiction or hoax. To that end – dubbing conspiracy theorists' methods – some genuine documentary material including coverage of the '*German Antarctic Expedition*' of 1938/39 was used. Also, great care was taken to create authentic looking false documents. It seemed furthermore pertinent to recognise curatorial conventions of historical exhibitions regarding the wording and the design of the text panels, the framing of historical photographs and documents, and the overall arrangement of the exhibits.

Rather than study curatorial theories, we spent time looking at actual history exhibitions, taking advice as needed from curators. The concept and material

for 'Base 211' was largely developed intuitively. Theory from other disciplines became especially interesting as we assessed the work for its capacity to facilitate the desired mode of response. The concept of suture, for example, provided an interesting reference to assess features that would make the viewer 'flip-flop in



Fig. 56: Jörg Jozwiak and Claudia Antonius, *Base 211* (detail), digital collage printed on baryta photographic paper, 9x6 cm.

and out of the illusion'. Various elements were identified as conducive to this, such as the mixture of authentic documentary material and our own (often humorous) supplements (Fig. 56). An essential aspect in this respect is the discrepancy between the (ostensive) history exhibition within the environment of the art gallery. The identified features inspired further thinking, which eventually led to the modification of some components.¹⁶ The temporary suspension of retrieval-focussed art assessment schemata could be anticipated because of the work's suturing features.

Applying this thesis' theory of meaning-making to 'Base 211' also involved identifying the work's repertoire. The essential semantic information needed to process this work appropriately is that its 'story' builds on an existing fringe theory involving the Nazi's construction of an underground base in Antarctica, and that this myth is still widely believed. Moreover, we examined the relation between emotion-stimulating and reflection-stimulating aspects in the work. The Nazi era setting of the narrative (especially due to the imagery included) is likely to attract attention. This historical period continues to fascinate people; literature and cultural theorist Sabine Hake even identified an "almost compulsive preoccupation with 'sexy Nazis' and 'nasty Nazis' in popular culture" (Hake 2012, p.3). Exploiting the Nazi theme deliberately to trigger attention would have been ethically questionable but the setting is an essential component of the existing myth that is the work's subject matter. Eventually, it is a part of

¹⁶ An information panel with book covers, website copies, etc. documenting already existing versions of the *Base 211*-myth was added as the final station of the trajectory through the exhibition.

the work's critical objective that such theories continue to proliferate and acquire new believers. We did consider carefully whether *toying* with this part of history is ethically feasible but decided to realise this work whilst omitting some elements.¹⁷

Another concern with '*Base 211*' was that the Nazi context could capture too much attention when the work was not meant to be a comment on Nazism in particular. Rather it deals with its *appropriation* by fringe theorists and hoaxers, the *reception* of their inventions and the acceptance of (historical) narratives more generally. According to our assessment, a fixation on the Nazi context is counterbalanced by emphasising specific details of the story. Instead of stressing issues related to Nazi ideology, the 'documentary' material focuses on the planning and construction of, and everyday life on, the base. Moreover the work is pervaded by humorous elements, which are an important means to spur viewer's doubts about historical authenticity. Also, contrary to existing versions of the myth, the construction and maintenance of the base is portrayed as a series of failures and misfortunes, such as most of the Nazis on the base dying from influenza.

The first text panel explains to visitors that the exhibition is a '*correction*' of existing fringe theories dealing with the same topic. To avoid this leading to a focus on a '*Nazi story*', an additional contextual frame is introduced. Not only the story of '*Base 211*' is told but at the same time the story of the efforts of two collectors who allegedly tracked down and acquired the items on display. This aspect is foregrounded by a video interview with one of them and thus through a medium drawing special attention. The format of the history exhibition functions as an intellectual trigger and fosters an impression of seriousness to counterbalance the absurdity of the narrative. However, this presents another threat to the work's repertoire. The discrepancy between form and content may be taken to suggest a critique of museum rhetoric, which would be a misinterpretation. This remains a weakness of the work.¹⁸

¹⁷ Initially we had considered, for example, the use of images of genuine underground Nazi facilities in Germany in digital collages but as we found out that these were almost always built by slave labour under dreadful conditions any appropriation for our purposes was out of question. For related discussions about cinematic comedy and satire dealing with the Nazi time, see: Fröhlich et al. (2003).

¹⁸ Alternative presentation modes (for example an online version or even channelling the fake imagery into fringe forums) were considered but not yet realised.

Overall, we came to the conclusion that *'Base 211'* appeals to the viewer's emotional engagement and thereby counters retrieval-oriented art assessment schemata. This effect is also fostered by the work's *intellectual* appeal, which is largely owed to the format of a history exhibition. The theory of meaning-making developed in this thesis has focused on the role of an 'affective ambush' in this respect. Much post-conceptual art, like *'Base 211'* uses intellectually oriented methods that facilitate the suspension of retrieval-oriented art assessment schemata. In contrast to more traditional Concept Art, the aim is less to provoke reflections about art's own ontology (although this may be considered) but about the world we live in and the viewer's place in it.

The intellectual appeal of *'Base 211'* notwithstanding, emotional aspects are also pertinent. Besides the potential excitement caused by the Nazi-setting, a certain *mirth* rivals approaches to seize the work by retrieval (an aspect also found in the works of Oursler and Superflex)¹⁹. Psychologist Avner Ziv argued that exploration, humour and art, converge in feeding on incongruity and novelty, or departures from what is usual, or expected (Ziv 1976). In this vein, humour may also function as another way to suspend conventional art assessment schemata and facilitate separative meaning-making. This assumption is supported by various studies on the relation between humour and people's creative potential suggesting that *"there is evidence that exposure to humour can enhance creative thinking, and that this effect is likely mediated by the positive emotion (i.e., mirth) associated with humour"* (Martin 2010, p.103).²⁰

'Spy-visits' like those I made to my snowman installation (see 1.1) might disclose actual patterns of viewer response related to humorous works. The option of systematically studying actual viewers' response will be considered in the final chapter; with regard to the *'Base 211'* project, we felt confident that it embodies the necessary elements to facilitate separative meaning-making.²¹

¹⁹ In a TV interview, Oursler paraphrased Sigmund Freud, saying *'a good joke can jump consciousness'* and that this is a technique he applies (Oursler 2010, 0:30min).

²⁰ For in-depth discussions on the role of humour in art, see: Higgie (2007) and Klein (2007).

²¹ The account in this section does not claim to cover our entire assessment of *'Base 211'*. Only a few considerations are presented here in order to exemplify how this thesis' theory of meaning-making may be applied to artworks.

5.5 Conclusion

Using various examples, it has been argued that theories from disciplines as diverse as psychology, biology, sociology, and film theory can help us better understand how an appeal to meaning-making is anchored in artworks. Which discourses lend themselves to such an investigation will always depend on the subject matter and methods of the work under review. This chapter also drew attention to the temporal aspects of meaning-making theory: When '*psychical distance*' is minimised during an encounter with the work, it may be only in hindsight that meaning can emerge.

The theory of meaning-making proposed in this thesis is informed by philosophical theories and scientific knowledge. As a general tool, artists and theorists may use this framework to describe what belongs to a work's repertoire, clarify modal intentions, and assess how it appeals to different kinds of meaning-making. An important variable in this context is the relation and interaction between features that appeal to viewers' emotional response and those that appeal to reflection. It is not assumed that this theory will play an important role in inspiring the production of art; rather it can be applied usefully to assess works in hindsight or at an advanced stage of their production.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

The tasks facing us today are to analyse how contemporary art addresses the viewer and assess the quality of the audience relations it produces: the subject position that any work presupposes and the democratic notion that it upholds, and how these are manifested in our experience of the work.

Claire Bishop, 2004¹

6.1 Research Summary

Meaning: A work-inspired and viewer-produced agency to change the viewer's ability to reflect, feel, respond, perceive, or act in a way the viewer will judge as beneficial. An object or situation becomes meaningful when it acquires a purpose in a viewer's life; the artist is relevant to a work's meaning only by setting the theme or subject matter as an obligatory platform for personal meaning.

Meaning-making: The deliberate act of exploring an artwork's potential and/or one's own response to an artwork in order to find meaning, coupled with the (often verbalised) elaboration of that meaning. Meaning-making is an emotion-driven *intellectual* activity that facilitates habitual (including conceptual) change and is ultimately motivated by the natural desire to increase one's own ability to understand or act.

The above definitions reflect how meaning and meaning-making in the realm of art apprehension are interpreted throughout this thesis. The two questions addressed in this study are:

- a) How can meaning and meaning-making be properly defined in the context of contemporary art practice? and
- b) What conditions best facilitate meaning-making?

To address these questions, various philosophical, historical and psychological perspectives were explored and information taken from these fields was evaluated using examples from contemporary and historical art practice. Viewer responses were accounted for drawing on empirical audience research findings and individual experiences recorded in Internet blogs, journal articles and other

¹ Bishop (2004, p.78)

sources. Views of practitioners were taken from interviews and/or statements, articles and essays written by artists. The meaning-making processes defined in this thesis, and the components of art-related meaning-making are illustrated in Fig. 57:

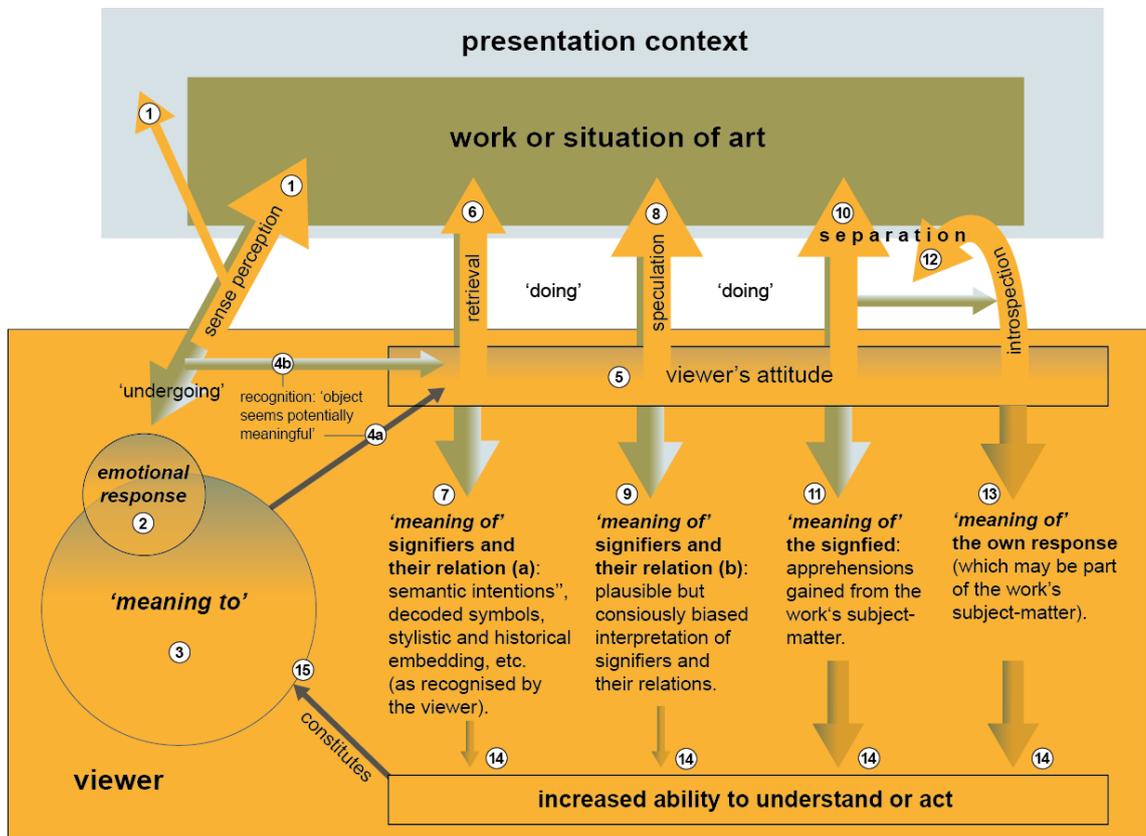


Fig. 57: Components of art-related meaning-making

Reflecting on an artwork is inevitably influenced by the presentation context, which includes but is not limited to the viewer's prior knowledge, values and expectations, as well as the exhibition venue, the exhibition title, and the placement of neighbouring artworks (1). The work and the presentation context influence the viewer's mood and spontaneous affective response (2). Initial associations, value judgements, and memories are triggered, which determine whether the work *seems likely* to integrate with one's interests and existing *'experience of the world'* (3). If the viewer decides that the work has potential to acquire 'meaning to', her/him s/he will be motivated (4a) to further investigate it (5). If a promise of 'meaning to' is absent, further investigation is unlikely. The motivation to reflect on an artwork is also conditioned by whether or not the artwork is actually recognised as a 'work' (4b). Although equally capable of

evoking associations and memories etc., a painting made by a monkey will not be considered meaningful because it ostensibly lacks any intention. The gallery context alone will often suffice in suggesting that an object is intended to be apprehended as art.²

Initially, the process of apprehension is one of *'undergoing'* followed by a phase of *'doing'*. This *doing* is where the actual *making* of meaning transpires, and this involves the reflective integration of triggered emotions, perceptions and memories within one's own view of the world. The viewer's unique perspectives and personal style of approaching art determines her/his 'mode' of meaning-making. This thesis proposes a taxonomy for distinguishing three different, although often interwoven, *modes of meaning-making* and their attendant *meaning-types*:

- *Retrieval* (6) focuses on the work's *signifiers* in order to reveal the artist's intentions, formal relations within the work, symbolised/metaphorical content, stylistic and historical classification and/or the context of the work's production (7). Meaning-retrieval can be supported by drawing on all kinds of contextual material, from titles to historical sources.
- *Speculation* (8) also focuses on the work's signifiers but with a conscious, often playful bias. Subsequent meaning arises from personal and tentative interpretations (9).
- *Separation* (10) focuses on the work's *signified*, and leads to meaning related to the work's subject matter (11). An important variant of separation is *introspection* (12) where the focus is on one's own way of responding. Separative meaning-making as the result of *being turned back to oneself (as viewer/participant)* leads to meaning related to one's own habits and beliefs (13).

In each case, the viewer's initial intuition that a work holds the potential for 'meaning to' her/him is further explored by verbalising the 'meaning of' the artwork. At first, a 'promise of meaning' manifests affectively as a state of excitement or interest that fosters further attention. The intuition that the work has 'meaning to' oneself is made tangible through determining the 'meaning of' the work. The meaning-making process can thus also be described as an attempt to determine the relation between the object and the viewer. As they

² Even a painting by a monkey shown in a gallery (as opposed to a zoo or a laboratory) suggests an intention; in this case, however, it would be that of a curator.

arise, new apprehensions are implicitly or explicitly integrated into the viewer's existing knowledge potentially increasing her/his understanding (14). Resultant conceptual changes qualify art apprehension as meaning-making in that they fulfil the original 'promise of meaning' (15):

- *Retrieved meaning* improves the viewer's understanding of art in terms of its formal and symbolic/metaphorical qualities and its (art-) historical context. It potentially fosters the viewer's ability to articulate related knowledge in the future.
- *Speculated meaning* is similar to retrieved meaning but it also fosters playful and creative activities.
- *Separated meaning* yields a better understanding of oneself and/or the world we live in.

Separative meaning-making involves the viewer's thinking beyond 'art as art' by identifying with and expanding upon the artist's concerns. In doing so, the main emphasis is not placed on reconstructing the artist's point of view or intentions, but rather on making personal connections with the subject matter presented.

With this understanding of meaning-making, it is possible to address the central research question *how contemporary artists can facilitate conditions under which viewers will be more likely to actively participate in the meaning-making of their work*. Individuals respond differently to different stimuli, and each individual has personal – sometimes 'existential' – themes that, when evoked, will let her/him temporarily forget that s/he is looking at a work of art. This entails the temporary suspension of typical, often retrieval-oriented art assessment schemata. The same effect occurs on a relatively predictable basis when stimuli appeal to certain biologically or socially determined response behaviours. Salient examples include triggers of disgust, sexual attraction, or empathy. An art object or situation that elicits any of these types of response challenges the viewer's 'psychical distance'. Rather than recognising an object or situation as one to be contemplated, one will first and foremost perceive it as a *phenomenon* of potential harm or benefit. Much art places particular emphasis on stimuli that trigger intuitive, predictable ways of responding. To facilitate meaning-making, as opposed to a purely emotional/visceral response, it is crucial that the respective appeal is counterbalanced by offers to engage with the work on a more intellectual level. Emotional stimuli work against attitudes of

meaning-retrieval, but do not in themselves promote separative meaning-making.

A key condition that encourages a reflective attitude is the gallery or museum environment, as it embodies an *'atmosphere of theory'* that will remind the viewer of the observed phenomenon's status as an object or situation to be thought about. Wall texts and other curatorial devices used by both curators and artists are specific *tools* to promote reflection within the gallery context. The return to a reflective attitude can also be facilitated by features that belong to the work itself. A popular artistic strategy is the use of *'blanks'*; that is the omission or obfuscation of information that the viewer is then obliged to provide. Methods used to achieve this include *concealing details*, posing *narrative puzzles*, and using *apparently unrelated titles*.

Stimuli for reflection cannot *determine* separative meaning-making. The viewer may still prefer to fill in blanks by pursuing the artist's (or imagined experts') 'solution'. The examples discussed suggest that attitudes of separative meaning-making are enhanced by reflection-evoking stimuli that are closely linked to the emotional experience: the text element in Alfredo Jaar's *Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, the visible technology in Tony Oursler's installations, and the union of emotional and intellectual triggers in Tino Sehgal's conversational prompts. Fig. 58 summarises the artist's potential for influencing the viewer's meaning-making.

For an artist interested in the viewer's participation in the making of meaning it is important to convey the information needed to do so in accordance with the work's *repertoire* (a). The repertoire includes, first and foremost, social norms and conventions addressed by the work as well as historical facts that need to be understood in order to make sense of the work. The repertoire belongs to the artist's *semantic intentions* (b). Semantic intentions are what viewers focussing on meaning-retrieval are most interested in knowing (c); for many artists however, any semantic intentions that go beyond the repertoire are not important for the viewer to know. To debilitate retrieval-dominated approaches and foster more creative kinds of meaning-making (d) belongs to the artist's *modal intentions* (e). Modal intentions are aimed at the viewer's *way* of responding to the artwork (f) and can be articulated, like all intentions, via the art object/situation and/or its presentation context. Artists sometimes manipulate the presentation context (for example by

providing wall texts) (g); however, this is more commonly the domain of curators or educators who know (or assume) what the artist's intentions are (h) and facilitate their apprehension (i). The artist *can* appeal to viewers' emotions and spontaneous affective responses (j). To balance emotional and affective responses³ (k) and facilitate separative meaning-making (m), requires stimuli that evoke reflection (l).

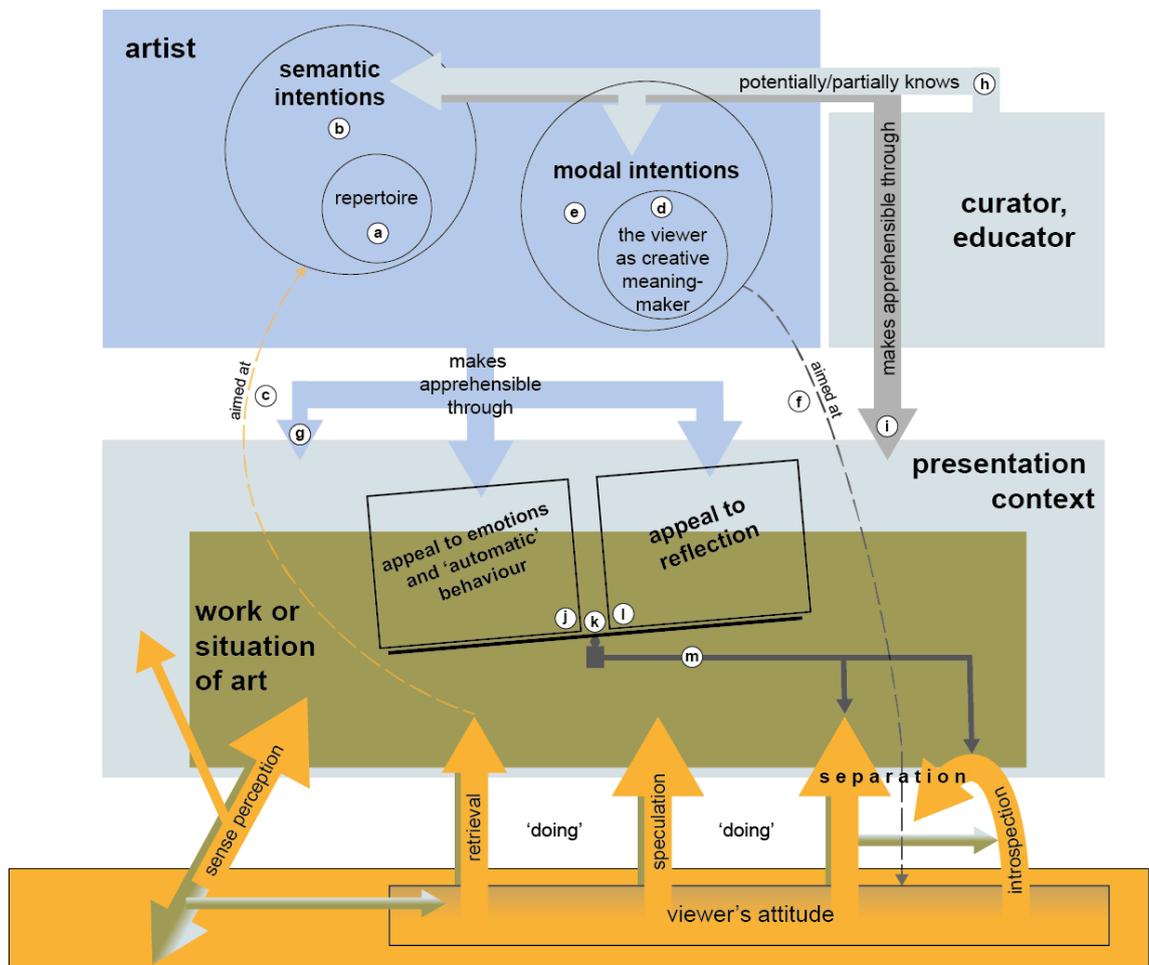


Fig. 58: The artist's potential influence on the viewer's meaning-making

This thesis has addressed current reservations towards the idea of meaning, and investigated both this concept and its definitions in the context of visual art practice. However, much of what appears to be a fundamental critique in fact focuses on, and is thus limited to, specific notions of meaning. One of these notions concerns the identification of an object, situation or condition's meaning with its *objective* 'truth' or a universally accepted definition. Another

³ The differentiation of emotional and affective responses refers to the distinction introduced in 3.4. This thesis has mainly focussed on the evocation of emotions.

critiques the possibility of *subjective* meaning by positing that there is no *subject*, understood as a self-determined authority capable of producing unique meaning. The first critique is shared by this thesis; the second is accommodated by acknowledging that cultural, social, and historical contexts play a significant role in shaping the subject. However, this view is ultimately too reductive as it neglects phenomenological and pragmatic aspects of meaning. There is an epistemological difference between ‘meaning of’ (something) and ‘meaning to’ (somebody) and between meaning-making concerned with a work’s signifiers and its signified.

A key issue in this thesis has been the tie between emotional and intellectual aspects of meaning-making and the role of verbalisation. It was considered that the concept of meaning could be re-defined positing a purely ineffable quality. When an object or situation *means* something *to* a person (that is, the object is considered valuable *by* an individual *to* her/him) meaning (‘meaning to’) can become a driving force that does not require verbalisation. However, to replace the definition of meaning as discourse-rooted with one being an emotion-rooted promoter of self-change turned out to be too radical. It cannot be claimed that what the viewer of an artwork verbally elaborates has nothing to do with its meaning. This would also downplay the utility of language for clarifying what was sensed. When viewers verbalise their apprehensions they offer interpretations, first and foremost, to themselves. This does not imply that a work’s ‘meaning to’ oneself can be fully captured in words, nor that any meaning made must stand the critique of others. Verbalisation is the most tangible indication of a deliberate activity of *making* (which is by definition one of constructing or elaborating) in meaning-making.

Two principle aims of this thesis were:

- a) to clarify and define the concept of meaning-making and
- b) to compile a list of factors that can potentially facilitate meaning-making.

Both of these aims were accomplished. The third aim was to explore whether and how the concept of meaning-making can serve as an example for the potential utility of non-art-disciplines within the realm of art. So far, this has only been partially accomplished. This thesis has presented pertinent areas of existing research from non-art disciplines, and has provided one example of how art practitioners could use this knowledge to assess their own work. In the

following sections it will be argued that a theory of meaning and factors that facilitate meaning-making as defined in this thesis can also be valuable in art theoretical and art educational contexts.

6.2 Application of the Research Findings

The relation between '*designing for the viewer*' (Housen 2007) and producing daring, innovative work guided by 'free' intuition is a delicate one. The balance between emotional stimuli and triggers of reflection, between openness and closure, and between too little and too much information cannot and should not be defined by any rules. This balance has to be 'sensed' and resolved on a case-by-case basis. However, to make the best decisions it can be helpful to consider what constitutes the meaning-making process and what the viewer needs to know. This research has developed new definitions and a new vocabulary that may be useful within the field of art theory and art criticism, and reveals the benefits of a stronger emphasis on reception-oriented questions in art educational contexts.

6.2.1 Art Theory and Art Criticism

This thesis has shown that meaning-making is a pertinent concept in contemporary art practice because it describes important aspects of the art viewer's participatory activity. Attention was drawn to the connotation of meaning-making as creating individual purpose for the viewer, whilst maintaining, through the notion of repertoire, that the artist's semantic intentions must not be sacrificed altogether. The approach taken here builds on Umberto Eco's concept of the Open Work, which has opened doors for debate on the viewer as meaning-maker. The Open Work concept reflects the ideas presented in this thesis in three ways. First, it establishes that certain types or genres of art are intended to be completed by the viewer. Second, it points out that openness must be delimited in order to avoid lapsing into arbitrariness, and, third, it upholds the intellectual dimension of art apprehension.

What the Open Work concept does not do is offer insight into the artist's role in *facilitating* an open response. Eco only broadly suggested that "*intentional form*" should "*organize the vision*" (Eco 1989 [1962], p.99) and that

occasionally artists will have to provide a catalogue text (Eco 1968, n.p.)⁴. Openness is not only liable to be confused with arbitrary interpretation, but also to being cancelled out by retrieval-oriented approaches to art. Several strategies have been discussed through which artists disrupt retrieval-oriented art assessment schemata. In the vein of the Open Work, it is concluded that viewers' understanding of the repertoire and their mode of approach must not, and does not have to be left entirely to chance.

Openness is a part of the '*meaning of*' the artwork; a perspective that Eco endorsed in principal by arguing that Open Works function as "*epistemological metaphors*" for "*the unlimited discovery of contrasts and oppositions that keep multiplying with every new look*" (Eco 1989 [1962], p.93). How many of the informal painters Eco favoured as exemplars would subscribe to this view is debateable; surely many contemporary and more conceptually minded artists have a different understanding of openness. As art theorist Christopher Atkins wrote, they challenge their audience to participate within the '*articulation of different world views and to exchange and critique them*' (compare 2.11).⁵ Such works can still enforce the insight that political or social 'realities' are contingent, however, they also allow personal conclusions and conceptual change. Meaning-making, and especially *separative* meaning-making, is now an important process involved in responding to works' open-ended design. Artworks remain open to other viewers' meaning-making and potentially to the viewer's own re-assessment, but it is hard to accept that meaning once made would *have* to be perpetually overturned.

A different perspective on openness is offered by Jacques Rancière. His concept of the '*emancipated spectator*' posits a viewer who links "*what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen*" and associates the display "*with a story which she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented*" (Rancière 2009, p.13).⁶ Elsewhere, Rancière argued that art claiming to be 'political' requires a '*readable political signification*' (Rancière 2013 [2003], p.59), which would be evidenced in the work's repertoire. Taken together, these perspectives constitute an 'update' of the Open Work concept: building on the repertoire, the

⁴ See under the headline "*Dall' informale alle nuove figurazioni*".

⁵ In the words of Jacques Rancière: They construct "*different realities, different forms of common sense – that is to say, different spatiotemporal systems, different communities of words and things, forms and meanings*" (Rancière 2009, p.102).

⁶ Superflex' '*The Financial Crisis*' emphasises this scenario.

viewer constructs or elaborates (or *'translates'*) the work's 'meaning to' her/him. However, this is not Rancière's own conclusion. Although articulated as a theory of political art, he eventually denied the requirement of a *'readable political signification'* reflecting his view. The *'ideal effect'* of *'political art'*, Rancière wrote ...

... is always the object of a negotiation between opposites, between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning. (Rancière 2013 [2003], p.59)

This containment of the readable signification by the uncanny is not sufficient for Rancière. The ideal *'political effect'* in this interpretation belongs to *"the pre-suppositions of the strategic view of art"* that he himself denies:

[The] possible subversive effect [of art] is the effect of aesthetic experience and not the effect of artistic strategies. [This] does not mean that precisely art is not subversive, art can contribute to produce new changes in the configuration of the sensible, in the cartography of the visible and the sensible, but it cannot anticipate and calculate its own effect. (Rancière et al. 2008, para.10,12)

This thesis follows Rancière (and mainstream art theory) in his discontent with art that passes on prefabricated messages, but it does not reject any *'strategic view of art'* *per se*. To dispense with the *'readable political signification'* creates a limbo regarding an artwork's critical momentum. Denying that 'good' artworks have momenta is not an option here since this would incapacitate the artist and foster arbitrariness in meaning-making. It is admitted however, that the notion of the *'readable political signification'* needs specification to ensure it is not confused with didactic messages. The idea of the repertoire lends itself to this purpose. It posits the readable (political) signification not as a teaching but as a platform from which new meaning can emerge in correspondence with a work's momentum. The repertoire may sometimes be minimal, even banal but yet indispensable: Shapiro's *'Last Suppers'* show recreated death row meals (and not anyone else's food); Cardoso's sculptures are modelled on sexual organs of animals (they are not informal sculptures and are not based on any other forms). Such basic significations are also evident in all of Rancière's examples. For instance, it is a political signification made readable by Jaar that, with Gutete Emerita's eyes,

we face a civil war survivor and it is important that they do not belong to any other person.

Artists must anticipate viewer responses to a certain extent. Art is rarely the production of Rorschach test-like ink spills that the artist and (other) viewers can *equally* use to inspire their imagination. Here, the (ignorant master) artist and the (emancipated) spectator would indeed be equal meaning-makers, but this leads back to the 'promise of meaning': viewers' interest in an artwork depends on whether they confront an '*intentional organisation*', regardless of how far their own meaning-making will eventually digress from such defaults.

Another issue to be considered is the epistemological status of meaning. The concept of meaning-making developed throughout this thesis is both descriptive and normative. To elucidate a descriptive dimension the research drew from philosophical approaches, empirical audience studies, psychological research and viewer testimonials. Because the objective of meaning-making is to increase a person's ability to understand or act and to bring about conceptual change, the concept is also normative. The capacity of an artwork to elicit meaning-making can thus be used as an evaluative measure. Being descriptive but normatively charged, 'meaning' in the context of art is a '*thick*' concept.⁷

Since the evocation of separative meaning-making is a key objective of much contemporary art, achieving it becomes pivotal for a work's success. When an artist holds that the viewer's contribution to the meaning of an artwork is important, creates favourable conditions for viewers to add their '*contribution to the creative act*', and viewers are in fact inspired to do so (demonstrable, for example through viewer testimonials or audience studies), her/his work can be seen as successful. Some philosophically minded art theorists might reject this approach, arguing that measurable agreement of people regarding an artwork's meaning (for example through its description by certain adjectives) or value (on a preference scale), are at least to the philosopher far from sufficient evidence

⁷ Descriptive concepts that are normatively charged have been described as '*thick concepts*' (Williams 1985; Dancy 1995; Bonzon 2009; Kirchin 2013). The terminology is owed to the idea that some descriptive concepts are difficult to define without an undertone of evaluation. Examples include '*courage*', '*blasphemy*', and '*coherence*'. Philosopher Bernard Williams argued that certain concepts "*seem to express a union of fact and value. The way these notions are applied is determined by what the world is like (for instance, by how someone has behaved), and yet, at the same time, their application usually involves a certain valuation of the situation, of persons or actions*" (Williams 1985, p.129). Hence they are said to be '*thicker*' than comparatively '*thin*' descriptive concepts (such as 'table') or clear-cut normative concepts (such as 'beauty').

that the work indeed has this meaning or value (Dickie 1962).⁸ Rather, such questions would have to be determined by the ruling aesthetic conventions and '*language games*' used to describe and evaluate art and these are beyond psychological methodology.

Such a critique gains little traction here since empirical observation does not mark the beginning, but the end of the envisaged evaluation. Observable strategies of appreciation do not define a work's meaning or value, rather, it is suggested that they be used to assess whether already defined criteria of meaning and value are realised in viewers' meaning-making practices. It is not the empirical researcher's task to determine what an audience's response will or should be, this area is always to be left to the artists or philosophers involved. It is also acknowledged that the complexity and subjectivity of responding to artworks is not conducive to empirical research. What empirical research *can* do however, is show whether predicted and well-defined types of response correspond with those responses observed in viewers (Reber 2008; Konečni 2012, sec.II.1). With the definition of various modes of meaning-making, this thesis provides the necessary foundation for such an investigation (compare 6.3).

The categories of retrieving, speculative, and separative meaning-making were introduced based on philosophical premises, which were then substantiated by empirical and anecdotal evidence, and this approach can be extended to art criticism. This does not imply that all 'value' criteria have to be empirically verifiable, but in the case of participation in meaning-making such confirmation is feasible. The main hurdle will concern resources, namely that empirical observations are available in only a few exceptional cases. Therefore, in practice, art criticism will often rely on those determining features that make a work likely to facilitate meaning-making. Examples of such features have been presented throughout this thesis, highlighting especially the relation between stimuli of emotional and of intellectual responses, as well as the necessity to make a work's repertoire readable.

Finally, this thesis contributes to the theory of art by providing new vocabulary to better describe various aspects of meaning-making. Some concepts from other disciplines were transferred to visual art theory, including

⁸ Views similar to Dickie's were already pronounced by Ludwig Wittgenstein in 1938 (Wittgenstein 1967, II §35 [p.17], III §7 [p.19]); more recently they were partially re-affirmed by Gopnik (2012), see also: chapter one, note 19.

Wolfgang Iser's notions of *'repertoire'* and of *'negation'* as well as Jerrold Levinson's distinction between *'semantic'* and *'categorical'* intentions. The concept of categorical intentions was slightly modified and termed 'modal intentions' in order to underpin that component of artistic intention that focuses on the viewer's general *mode* of responding, which is not limited to categorisation. Whilst all these describe aspects of the artist's part in shaping a work's meaning, the main emphasis of this investigation was put on the viewer's share. In this area, the new terminology of *retrieving*, *speculative* and *separative* meaning-making was introduced in order to distinguish between different facets of the viewer's *'contribution to the creative act'*.

6.2.2 Art Studies (Higher Education)

An argument for integrating aspects of art's reception into art school curricula was presented by the dean of Columbia University's School of the Arts, Carol Becker, who argued that art students ...

... need to be helped to understand not only the subject of their work but its objective, they must learn to ask themselves who would be their ideal viewer and who, most likely, will be their actual viewer. What might the audience need to know to understand the work? How much information should they offer?

(C. Becker 1993, p.110)

Like Howard Becker's statement regarding artists catering to professional art audiences (see 1.2.1), this is a similarly delicate question as it challenges students to consider how much they are willing to adjust their work to suit a potential audience. C. Becker emphasised, however, that this is inevitable, for instance, if artists seek to reach audiences who have little or no previous knowledge of art. The growing recognition of this objective by many art schools is evidenced in current programmes that have compulsory elements of *'socially engaged practice'* and in the existence of specialised branches of study dedicated to this field.⁹ Within such a framework it is pertinent to consider how people are likely to respond and many higher education programmes do pose

⁹ Examples are the MA programmes in *'Participatory & Community Arts'* at Goldsmiths College and Staffordshire University, *'Social Sculpture'* at Oxford Brookes University, and *'Socially Engaged Practice'* at Ireland's National College of Art and Design, and the Art. Similar programmes are offered at other art schools across the UK and in many other countries.

such questions.¹⁰ However, the focus of this thesis has not been on practices seeking to reach 'new audiences' in particular. To avoid misunderstandings regarding the assumed responsibilities of the artist, it was noted that this thesis' advocacy of heeding the viewer's meaning-making must not be confused with the aims and debates surrounding social inclusion. Thus the question of what role knowledge about viewers' meaning-making plays in the context of art education must be posed more broadly.

A pragmatic answer lies with Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Michael Shanks who argued in their contribution to the edited volume *Art school: Propositions for the 21st Century*, that the sheer amount of different media in contemporary art asks for multiple modes of audience engagement:

As we envision a program that meets the requirements of twenty-first-century arts practice education, an understanding of engagement is essential. The immense flow of data needs to be controlled by the artist and directed toward the viewer in such a way that the viewer enters the rich strata that joined in the work and are completed by the viewer.
(Schnapp & Shanks 2009, p.149)

Art students should therefore be encouraged to consider how specific media are likely to affect the viewer. The discussions of working with video and life performers (see 5.2 and 5.3) resonate with and exemplify this point.

Some might object that art belongs to the few, 'free', spheres of human existence where no definable purpose or utility determines means and actions. In this vein, the function of the art school is to promote art as a field of possibilities, free exploration, and experiment unconstrained by established methodology. Gary Peters, professor of critical and cultural theory at York St. John University took this view to its extreme by advocating an "*(aesthetic) educational approach that is intent on developing the will and the wherewithal to operate effectively within the arbitrary and contingent circles of incomprehensibility*" (Peters 2010, p.111).¹¹ To anticipate or facilitate the viewer's response would be diametrically opposed to the primacy of freedom,

¹⁰ The 'Contextual Practice' MFA at Carnegie Mellon University's School of Art, for example, encourages students to consider: "*Who is your audience, and how does that audience shape the meaning of your work? What impact does the work have on the life of the audience? Where do you site your work, and how does that site change how the work is perceived?*" (Carnegie Mellon University 2013, para.5)

¹¹ See: chapter four, note 4.

autonomy, and intuitive experimentation. This view has been disputed throughout this thesis.

Cross-disciplinary knowledge, including theories of reception, does not *substitute* lived experience, artistic intuition, and free experimentation, but *adds* to them. First, it was pointed out that artists are permeated with learned norms of what constitutes a 'good' work and thus they necessarily, though not always deliberately, anticipate viewer responses. Second, reservations about students being led to 'engineer' audience insights are countered by the fact that it is not the viewers' understanding of a message that is advocated here, but a *mode* of responding. It has been proposed that art students should be motivated to study conditions under which viewers will be more likely to adopt an *attitude* of separative meaning-making. This is expedient precisely *because* the viewer is so often envisaged as a proactive *maker* (as opposed to a *decoder*) of meaning, and the artist as *not being* the warrantor of signification.

Another way to dispute that attending to the viewer's response opposes art's autonomous spirit is to hint at the potentially tacit effect of related knowledge. Few people would argue that an artist who has first learned and then applies the effect of complementary colours unduly 'engineers' a response. The same applies to photographic and cinematic recording, editing, and dramatic techniques. They are methods to appeal to and resonate with viewers' perceptual systems and common response behaviour. Arguably, the *use of knowledge* in art creation is more acceptable when it remains intuitive. Propaganda artists, advertising professionals, and illustrators calculate and test the effect of their methods and this is a crucial reason to distinguish this type of work from 'fine' arts. The former promote meaning-retrieval, the latter speculative and separative meaning-making. Once the mutual amplification of red and green or the effect of the establishing shot is learned, it is internalised and often applied intuitively. By extension, knowledge about biologically, psychologically or socially determined ways of responding to certain stimuli will operate similarly.

The above can only be a secondary or corollary argument however. In many situations, video artists consider carefully how to use an establishing shot and painters will also *think* about adding a red to amplify a green. Furthermore, the finished work, as a product of the artist's tacit and/or deliberately applied knowledge, is usually *evaluated* by her/him before it is presented to the public.

A vast amount of works never leave the studio because they do not pass the artist's own assessment, and it is questionable whether the decisions involved are always purely intuitive.

In an environment where art schools promote an understanding of art as 'research', theoretical frameworks are increasingly important. Philosopher Donald Schön described the "*reflective practitioner*" as involved in "*reflection-in-action*" and "*reflection-on-action*" (Schön 1983). This notion can be applied to the artist-researcher who tries to make sense of her/his own decisions, as s/he "*reflects on the understandings which have been implicit in his action, understanding which he surfaces, criticises, restructures, and embodies in further action*" (Scrivener 2000, para.19). Any change made '*in further action*' will change the defaults of the work's reception.

There is no qualitative difference between knowledge related to the viewer's meaning-making and many established standards of art school curricula. Students would need neither their tutors' nor fellow students' feedback if audience response was immaterial. Goldsmiths College defines the BA (Honours) Fine Art programme as equipping students "*with creative, interpretive, critical and analytical skills*" to enable them to "*participate in and contribute to the expanding field of contemporary art*" (Goldsmiths College, University of London 2013, para.1). The prospectus of the same course at London's Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design agrees that "*critical and reflexive 'moments'*" are "*at the centre of teaching and learning*" and this includes discussions about "*systems for the production of meaning*" and the development of "*a theoretical language for practice that brings it into association with different forms of literature and criticism*" (Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design 2013, p.3). Imputing that such discussions are rather typical than limited to these specific colleges and that they are intended to have a bearing not only on students' general knowledge, their merit is to introduce learners to views and contexts that they may bring to their work. A key objective of both studio practice (including tutorials) and contextual studies thus already is to afford students perspectives on how their work will be received. Berkeley University states explicitly that its Art Practice graduate programme "*seeks to help students develop a keen sense of their audience, and to consider how they will reach, or even create, that audience for their work*" (The University of California, Berkeley 2013, para.10).

Tutors' and fellow students' feedback indicates how other people make meaning. Art history and philosophy seminars challenge students to situate their work within '*an atmosphere of theory*' and draw conclusions regarding how their work is likely to be contextualised. Both aspects of art school education disclose how meaning will potentially be made. Seminars and/or workshops exploring biologically, psychologically and socially determined responses and common art apprehension schemata would complement existing art school curricula and further our understanding of audience behaviour. This thesis offers several examples that demonstrate the relation between artists' strategies and the human response system that might serve as examples in related future debates, and the concepts of retrieving, speculative and separative meaning-making provide a structure for discussing and further exploring different modes of viewer response.

6.2.3 Other Educational Areas

There is an increasing interest in the concept of meaning-making in the context of art education in museums (Skregelid 2010; Deeth 2012; Fróis & White 2013)¹². Museum studies scholar Eilean Hooper-Greenhill favours a concept of museum pedagogy that acknowledges the "*active role of the individual mind in making meaning*", respectively the "*active meaning-making work that learners do to make knowledge their own*" (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, p.42,35). Hooper-Greenhill acknowledges the role of individually shaped meaning and other researchers see this as belonging to the contemporary "*categories from which to discuss educational philosophy and the work of museums as well as the values and beliefs that serve as their foundation*" (Arriaga & Aguirre 2013, p.128).¹³ From this perspective, art education researchers Amaia Arriaga and Imanol Aguirre consider it especially enlightening when "*information and thoughts are articulated with one's own experience*", and provoke "*mechanisms for self-reflection and self-affirmation*

¹² Lisbet Skregelid points to the works of Falk & Dierking (2000), Hooper-Greenhill (2007), and Taylor (2008); Fróis & White draw attention to (among others): Barrett (2002), Carroll (2007), Duncum (2004), Émond (2010), Parsons (2002), White (2011).

¹³ Arriaga & Aguirre identified four overlapping framings of the concept of art by museum educators; it is seen "*as a visual representation and interpretation as identification*", "*as communication and interpretation as decodification*", "*as an intellectual, historical and cultural fact, and interpretation as an opportunity for critical reflection*", and "*as experience and interpretation as an opportunity for self-development*" (Arriaga & Aguirre 2013, p.128).

about who we are” (Arriaga & Aguirre 2013, p.134/135). This approach to meaning-making is not self-evident among educators. As Charman & Ross’ study of teachers’ interpretative approaches (see 1.1.2) indicates and many other investigations confirm, educational practice often encourages meaning-making in retrieval mode (Tavin 2007). It is frequently seen as the key pedagogical agenda of art education to enable people to recognise formal, symbolic and historical aspects of artworks and to seize the artist’s intentions.¹⁴ This thesis does not dispute the importance of these issues for art education, but it does submit that to fully account for contemporary art they are incomplete and offers the concept of separative meaning-making as a supplemental model. This theoretical model resonates with the conclusion of museum education researcher Eva Van Moer that the *“challenge for museums is to find ways to formulate exhibitions that start from genuine experiences and lead to inquiry”* and for educators to *“develop tools which allow visitors to position themselves and make them think from various positions”* (Van Moer 2010, p.143/144; also Hein 1999; Deeth 2012). Future art viewers that ‘come prepared’ to make meaning are going to be welcomed by artists and curators.

Besides preferences for retrieval-oriented interpretation, another problem in pedagogical discussions of meaning-making is the focus on ‘aesthetics’. Educational psychologist João P. Fróis and art education scholar Boyd White for example, defined part of one of their studies’ rationale as *“to provide a better understanding of how meaning making is achieved in relation to aesthetic experiences”* (Fróis & White 2013, p.110). Whereas in many studies (including that of Fróis and White) notions of the ‘aesthetic’ and ‘meaning-making’ largely converge, Michael Parsons posited two closely related though ultimately distinct categories (Parsons 2002). Parsons defined aesthetic experience as being distinguished by a direct *“grasp of aesthetic qualities of the object”* rather than making discursive connections that can be verbalised and that refer to the concept of meaning (Parsons 2002, p.26).¹⁵ Parsons further elaborated that

¹⁴ For a review see: Tavin (2007).

¹⁵ Parsons elaborated that *“we might speak in terms of aesthetic qualities and of aesthetic experience”* if we envision the *“satisfying moment of response to the work in which the qualities are directly seen. If on the other hand we have in mind the mental activities involved in constructing a coherent response to a work, that is, the kinds of connections a viewer might make and the discursive processes involved, we might speak of constructing its meanings”* (Parsons 2002, p.32/33).

encounters with art usually entail both components, because “*knowledge about images would be dead information and the direct grasp of qualities would be superficial*”; a view that supports the theory developed in this thesis (Parsons 2002, p.33). However, Parsons maintained the contentious and unnecessary notion of ‘aesthetics’ (see 1.3.3), even though ...

... there is no doubt that in contemporary terms aesthetic experience is cognitive, not only because it is the result of active attention and investigation but also because the direct grasp of the qualities of objects is itself an act of cognition.
(Parsons 2002, p.26)

Despite Parsons’ having ‘*no doubt*’ about the cognitive nature of the ‘*aesthetic experience*’, many scholars would disagree with his judgement.¹⁶ Instead of embarking on a debate about ‘aesthetic experience’ it is possible to dispense with the notion of the ‘aesthetic’ and refer to meaning-making instead when discussing intellectual modes of art apprehension. The notion of ‘meaning to’ accommodates affective/emotional aspects of art apprehension and ‘*direct grasping*’ by maintaining that meaning-making begins, prior to reflection, with *sensing* a ‘promise of meaning’. What is not accommodated are connotations of beauty, formal coherence, and transcendental notions, amongst others, that linger in the concept of the ‘*aesthetic experience*’. Some definitions of the aesthetic experience overlap with the concept of meaning-making; however, they unnecessarily complicate and potentially divert the debate. Meaning is in itself a difficult term – one that may be “*at least as complex and contested as the notion of the ‘aesthetic’*” (Parsons 2002, p.30). This thesis has made the concept of meaning and meaning-making more manageable by proffering new definitions that make it possible to address questions of art apprehension without referring to ‘aesthetics’.

¹⁶ An example would be Funch’s existential phenomenological theory of the aesthetic experience (see 3.4).

6.3 Limitations of the Study and Implications for Future Research

Although the central aims of the research were achieved, there were several limitations that are presented here as recommendations for future research. Because of its interdisciplinary nature, the main challenge throughout this project was the number of potential research avenues it could take and the extent of pertinent discipline specific literature available. Some avenues could not be fully explored, or addressed at all, within the scope of this thesis. One promising area that merits further consideration is Pragmatist art theory; it is assumed that a more in depth look at the concepts and ideas of Richard Shusterman and Mark Johnson would be beneficial. The theoretical model proposed in this thesis could potentially be further developed if contextualised within Gestalt theory, hermeneutics and reader-response criticism. Also, some recently published literature concerning the mutual interest of philosophical and psychological theories of art apprehension could not be explored.¹⁷

A conceptual problem that emerged during the research and could not be satisfactorily addressed concerns the trajectory from affective/emotional responses to the more intellectual processes of separative meaning-making. A difficulty here is that when an affect/emotion-dominated response passes over into a more intellectual one, there is always a possibility that viewers will fall back on meaning-retrieval. As stated above, the examples discussed in this thesis suggest that attitudes of separative meaning-making are likely to be enhanced by reflection-evoking stimuli that are closely linked to affective/emotional experiences. This raises both methodological and ideological questions regarding the limits of guiding response that this research brings to light, but does not address. Thus, future researchers may build on the work presented here by addressing questions raised by this thesis.

Another concept that warrants further consideration is that of 'repertoire'. It was argued that a significant share of the meaning of contemporary artworks is constructed by the viewer; the concept of repertoire was introduced in order to draw attention to the share of the artist. This may be challenged on definitional

¹⁷ For example: Schellekens & Goldie (2011), Shimamura & Palmer (2012), Konečni (2012), Roald & Lang (2013), Bulot & Reber (2013); also: Catalano (2009), Malm et al. (2013).

grounds: where does the repertoire begin and end, what is essential to it, and what is already contingent 'artist opinion'? Answers to these questions will have to be negotiated for each individual work of art, and we cannot anticipate agreement about any work's repertoire. To expand on the repertoire concept through further debate and perhaps case studies is thus another avenue that future researchers may want to explore.

Wolfgang Iser argued that before examining responses of real readers, one "*must examine the response-inviting structures of the text*", so that one can then "*see how much the actual reader has selected from the potential inherent in the text*" (Iser 1989, p.50). Although it is debatable whether audience investigations *must* be guided by response-inviting structures, their revelation can constitute a prolific base for such studies. It could be said that this thesis re-frames Iser's statement and applies it to visual art. '*Response-inviting structures*', as well as different modes of meaning-making have been explored and defined, however, to determine how and what kinds of meaning viewers *actually* construct would require further empirical research. Thus, new avenues of research have been opened where future researchers can build on questions realised by this investigation.¹⁸ A related task for further evaluation concerns artists' views on meaning and meaning-making. The correspondence between the theoretical objective to engage viewers in meaning-making (as defined in this thesis) and the actual modal intentions of artists drew mainly on anecdotal evidence. A survey or study of artists' perspectives on meaning-making and the role of the viewer would further current understanding of the artist-audience relationship.

This thesis has focussed on *verbalisation* as a tangible and important process for the production of meaning. However, it was also suggested that verbalisation is not mandatory, and when it occurs, it hardly does so independent from emotions and/or imagination. This idea is supported by the view that inspired imagination *already* constitutes meaning. Psychologist and art theorist Rudolf Arnheim famously stressed this point. Arnheim argued that productive thinking necessarily happens "*in the realm of imagery*" because the mind works predominantly with images; organising "*a total lifetime's experience into a system of visual concepts*" (Arnheim 1969, pp.v,232). Arnheim's

¹⁸ Such an investigation should be possible following psychologist Rolf Reber's assessment that once art theory has set "*the criteria of what the experience should be ... psychologists [can] examine whether the predicted experience matches the observed experience of the recipient*" (Reber 2008, p.367). See also: Konečni (2012).

conclusion was that art works best when “*it remains unacknowledged*”, that is, when it brings to mind “*those deeper and simpler powers in which man recognizes himself*” (Arnheim 1969, p.315). For Arnheim, such inspired imagination is more the domain of the artist than that of the viewer, and he was ultimately concerned with ‘revealing truth’ rather than ‘creative making’.¹⁹ In contrast, Iser held that ‘*meaning*’ is always produced by “*the imagination of the reader*” but this is more applicable to literature since literary fiction is prone to conjure up images in the mind of the reader whilst visual art provides them from the start (Iser 1994 [1976], p.9).

Alongside verbalisation, thinking in images is possibly another domain where ‘*adequate yielding*’ (Dewey) can produce conceptual change. If ‘concept’ is understood as defined in the introduction, which is a ‘*regularity in events or objects, designated by a label*’, these regularities may well be something we ‘see in front of our inner eye’ and that can be subject to modification. This at least is implied by Arnheim’s definition of “*visual thinking*” as consisting “*above all in the development of forms, of ‘perceptual terms’, and thereby fulfills the conditions of the intellectual formation of concepts*” (Arnheim & Grundmann 2001, para.37). To explore meaning-making on the basis of imagination, and the possible interplay between verbal and visual meaning-making, would be a far-reaching extension of this thesis.

Another issue that could only be touched upon here is the temporal aspect of meaning-making. After the immediate response, the way art continues to affect viewers is largely unexplored, partly due to the methodological difficulties that such an investigation would involve. When is it that people make meaning? Is it within seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks or even longer after the encounter with an artwork? What are the identifiable variables within the work, its presentation context, or the viewer that accelerate or postpone meaning-making? How does spontaneous meaning-making differ from meaning-making that occurs from a greater temporal distance? Questions like these are difficult to approach, but answers would yield interesting insights into the nature of meaning-making and the long-term effect art can have on viewers. Thus a better understanding of meaning-making will inform future studies of how we construct meaning at all levels, be it individually or collectively.

¹⁹ “*Art reveals to us the essence of things, the essence of our existence; that is its function*” (Arnheim in Arnheim & Grundmann 2001, para.30).

Having established the concept of (separative) meaning-making, it is possible to further explore the conditions required to facilitate it. This research has stressed the interruption of common, retrieval-oriented art assessment schemata by an ‘affective ambush’. This approach assumes a ‘rupture’ and an experience of dissonance; however it has been suggested that consonant experiences with art can also make viewers “*more aware of their personal psychological functioning*” (Émond 2006b, p.8).²⁰ Future investigations might explore whether and how affirmative experiences can also foster separative meaning-making.

Another valuable area of investigation involves how the division of meaning-making into the three distinct modes of retrieving, speculative and separative meaning-making can be exploited in education. In chapter 6.2, the utility of the meaning-making concept was located especially within the area of art theory and criticism, but it is conceivable that it can also be useful for developing pedagogical strategies. With regard to the debate in this thesis, Anne-Marie Émond suggested creating a ‘*laboratory*’ to explore a possible dialogue between artists and museum professionals (Émond 2013, personal communication). Such a laboratory could help realise new ways to encourage (separative) meaning-making in the museum.

Finally, the ‘*types*’ or ‘*genres*’ of art that this thesis focused on revolve around artworks in the context of galleries and museums. It would be worthwhile exploring how people make meaning beyond institutional contexts, such as when encountering artistic interventions that are not necessarily recognised or labelled ‘as art’. “[T]o see something as art according to the dominant ... paradigm of the contemporary artworld”, curator and art theorist Stephen Wright argued, “*is to acknowledge something terribly debilitating: that it is ‘just’ art – not the dangerous, litigious, real thing*” (Wright 2008, p.8). This is an important point with regard to art that addresses social, environmental, and/or cultural issues. It is almost exclusively in contexts where art can be expected to be categorised ‘as art’ that it makes sense to refer to meaning-making as retrieval, speculation and separation. If, as Wright argued, a growing number of artists have become disillusioned with the “*invisible parentheses around art*” and instead turn to intervention practices that enforce the “*efficacy of disconnection*” (separation), “*breaking with artworldly consensus*”, it would be

²⁰ See: chapter four, note 20.

interesting to investigate how meaning-making can be conceptualised in this area (Wright 2008, pp.8,5). The question then becomes: How do we make meaning if we encounter strange phenomena such as heaps of pink bin bags in front of every house in a street, or church pews rotated facing a corner of the building?²¹

6.4 Concluding Thoughts

When I built my snowman installation in Berlin, my own semantic intentions revolved around serious issues of climate change on the one hand, and humour (a 'solar powered snowman') on the other. Some viewers related to these issues, some did not. It was interesting to observe that viewers had associations similar to my own but it was also interesting that they came up with completely different ideas. The exhibition context was not conducive to metaphorical interpretations. The fact that one newspaper labelled my work an '*energy project*'²² stands as testimony to the influence of the work's exhibition context, which would have been very different in an art gallery.

The *repertoire* in this case concerned the recognition of the freezer's power source and the temporal aspect of the work; the snowman's one-year survival was dependent on power supplied by the very thing that would have destroyed it in natural circumstances. An explanation tag ensured that this was understood; the solar panels and all other technical equipment were openly exposed. The *modal intention* was to stop people in their daily routines and make them wonder, and this was easily achieved by the snowman's '*cuteness*' as an *emotional factor* (which many viewers commented on) and that the installation stood in marked contrast to its surroundings. What also helped was the overall nature of the piece as an assemblage of seemingly disparate and misplaced objects in the lobby of a science university. I believe this work embodies many of the meaning-making factors explored in this thesis, and successfully couples both emotional and intellectual stimuli.

²¹ See: Adrian Kondratowicz's project *Trash Maximalism* (since 2008), for which residents in various New York neighbourhoods have been encouraged to exchange their typical black refuse bags for a pink, lightly scented and biodegradable candy-wrapper-like version (see the project website: www.trashproject.biz). The unprepared visitor of the Marktkirche ('market church') in Hannover, Germany, in June 2007 found the pews rotated by 51 degrees causing the congregation to look towards Mecca ('51°', an installation by Lotte Lindner and Till Steinbrenner, see: www.lindner-steinbrenner.com/51.html)

²² BZ, March 29/30, 2003

Looking back at the work that inspired this thesis, I am pleased that the exploration has given me a language to account for various factors that facilitated the way people responded to the snowman. More importantly, the concepts developed here allow me to assess my own and other artworks in general because they demonstrate how certain conditions that facilitate viewers' meaning-making can indeed be influenced by the artist. Therefore those artists who *do* aim for viewers' meaning-making can build upon the concepts and factors put forward by this research to advance their own practice. From a research perspective, this study has contributed to a better understanding of meaning-making as an artistic objective and as an element of art's reception, which can ultimately further current understandings of the artist/audience relationship.

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