META -

We are most used to prefix 'meta' meaning :

1. "after, behind,"
2. "changed, altered,"
3. "higher, beyond;" from Greek meta "in the midst of; in common with; by means of; between; in pursuit or quest of; after, next after, behind,"

The term is applied to many disciplines in contemporary culture. Historically associated with the original branch of philosophy: Meta -physics, which is famous for asking the most rudimentary and problematic questions about the nature of being: such as why is there something rather than nothing?

For Korzybski, these questions are like 'Hunting a Snark', involving purely fictional entities. Korzybski was not a big fan of Metaphysics – being much more in favour of scientific methods, in Science and Sanity he writes;

'The guessing, ascribing of a fanciful, mostly primitive assumed, structure to the world is precisely what 'philosophy' and 'metaphysics' do.The empirical search for world-structure and the building of new theories, of necessary, or similar structure, is what Science does.' [1]

Despite this, Korzybski did see the importance of self awareness and self reflexivity – an important aspect of how the term 'Meta' has come to be used. More so now, due to the structure of organisations, institutions and the necessity to run efficiently, 'Meta' is used to suggest a shifting in levels of abstraction, to a more reflective level, allowing the tacit qualities of knowledge to be exposed.

As Donald Schon points out in his immensely popular book 'The reflective practitioner':

"...reflection can serve as a corrective to over-learning. Through reflection, a practitioner can surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice."[2]

Good practice incorporates self-reflexivity or regular going 'meta' – Only through a healthy commitment to self reflexivity can we examine tacit levels of understanding, formed by habit, which belong outside purely verbal levels of abstraction.

The term 'meta' as a stand alone adjective has been further popularised by the work of Douglas Hofstadter in books like 'Godel Escher Bach' published in 1979 and 'Metamagical Themas' 1985 which highlight how self reference contributes to knowledge. It is in this sense that we will use the term meta, when we are considering it in reference to semantics, communication and painting.

Of the many common uses of meta, it may be useful to note a few other prevalent examples, as it seems that in contemporary culture, most disciplines have a 'meta' accompaniment or are shadowed by a meta-awareness:

Meta – data – a relatively recent term, harking from the 1980's and library catalogue

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1 Korzybski, Alfred 'Science and Sanity', 1933, pg 60 'General on structure'
2 Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1983) at pg 61.

systems. Meta-data is data that provides information about other data.

meta-ethics – philosophical study of the nature of moral judgement – concerned with the *meaning or significance* of calling something right or wrong.

Meta-language – For example The words 'verb', 'noun' and 'adjective' are all examples of metalanguage – they are all words that we use to describe other words.

Meta-cognition – thinking about thinking – and meta memory – a self awareness of memory

Meta - gaming – where the notion of emergent gameplay encourages players to complete in game solutions using creative methodologies that the game designers did not for-see.

Meta - programming – where computer programs treat other programs as their data.

Meta - logic – Study of components of systems of logic.

These are just a few examples, essentially any field that looks into the structures and behaviours that generates and support the discipline could be described as having a 'Meta' awareness.

Primary for us in the study are the following three applications:

Meta - painting – which we shall explore further on. Whilst notable throughout art since at least the middle ages, the term was put on the map by Victor Stoichita in his 1997 book 'The Self aware image: An insight into Early modern meta painting' – where numerous examples of self-reflexivity in Spanish, flemish and other 16th and 17th century painting are explored.

Meta – semantics – which is posited by Neil Postman as the strategy by which we put ourselves, psychologically, outside the context of a situation, or 'semantic environment' so that we pause to consider its entirety.

And -

4:52 - St Sebastian

Meta-communication as made popular by Gregory Bateson, who credits Benjamin Lee Whorf with the original concept.

In his 1954 essay 'A Theory of Play and Fantasy', Bateson describes how after visiting a zoo and observing Monkeys at play, he noticed the monkeys would often bare their teeth and nip each other almost as they would in a real fight, he realised that such actions were dependent upon a tacit understanding between the monkeys that 'This is play' and that there was a shared knowledge that 'The actions in which we engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote'[3]

Bateson goes on to explain:

'Denotative communication as it occurs at the Human level is only possible after the

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3   Ibid pg 152

evolution of a complex set of metalinguistic (but not verbalised) rules which govern how words and sentences shall be related to objects and events.It is therefore appropriate to look for the evolution of such metalinguistic and meta-communicative rules at a pre-human and pre-verbal level' [4]

Bateson, who earlier in this essay references Korzybski and the map-territory relation, alludes here to 'un-spoken' or 'silent levels' that are full of information, and are the pre-human origins of the mechanics of verbalised communication.

Following Bateson,in the 60's the Palo Alto school developed five basic axioms of communication – which included the notion that 'we cannot not communicate', that is, every behaviour is a form of communication. Because behaviour does not have a counterpart (there is no anti-behaviour), it is impossible not to communicate.

But, if it is impossible not to communicate, it is also impossible to react to all communicative stimulus and to successfully receive all messages. As Don Fabun writes in his 'Communications : The transfer of meaning' 1968

'We react to only a few of all the waves of energy that ceaselessly pour in upon us from all directions. The spectrum of visible light – our " window to the world' – is only a tiny band out of all the waves of energy our instruments tell us are out there. What we can talk or write about is only a very small part of all that is going on 'out there"[5]

The kind of 'meta-awareness' sketched out by Fabun here, chiming with Korzybski's assertion that we are always abstracting from what is going on.

- quote written on the back of this painting, which is called 'St Sebastian' / arrows / and was inspired by Fabun's comment

Having delved into applications of 'meta' – we now turn to the notion of 'semantic'

4 Bateson, Gregory 'Steps to an ecology of mind' 1973, pg153
5 Fabun, Don 'Communications the Transfer of Meaning', pg 7 1968

SEMANTIC -

According to Korzybski - 'The term 'semantic' is derived from the Greek *semantikos*; 'significant' and *semainen :* 'to signify' and was introduced into literature by Breal in 1897.

From these historical definitions, Korzybski developed the term 'semantic reaction' to refer to part of the empirical subject matter of general semantics – he defines 'Semantic reactions' as psycho-logical reactions in connection with the meanings of symbols and events. In Science and Sanity he writes:

'The working tool of psycho-physiology is found in the semantic reaction. This can be described as the psycho-logical reaction of a given individual to words and language and other symbols and events in connection with their meanings'[6]

For Korzybski, a positive trait of the term 'Semantic' is that it is non-elementalistic as opposed to elementalistic. As we know, to be elementalistic is to separate things that cannot be separated empirically, for example a conscious organism (including humans) cannot be split into 'body' + 'mind'.

The advantage a non-elementalistic term is that it does not attempt this split, so for Korzybski, the term 'Semantic' involved both intellectual and emotional factors. A semantic reaction is perceived, felt, but also capable of being intellectualised as it is absorbed or evaluated by the nervous system. The term semantic reaction encompasses the whole reactive system.

Around twenty years after Korzybski published these insights, we find precisely this emotional and intellectual functionality of the term 'Semantic' exploited in the work of Charles Osgood and his partners.

In the 1957 study *The Measurement of Meaning,* Osgood devised a methodological device called the **'Semantic differential'** in an attempt to create a reliable, qualitative measure of connotative and denotative meaning (translation of sign into meaning).

The Semantic Differential was the main application of his more general attempt to measure the semantics or meaning of words, particularly adjectives, and their referent concepts.

Such experiments with the differential began by Osgood and his co-researchers positing a 'semantic space' and asking the participant to choose where his or her position lay, on a scale between two polar adjectives for example : "Adequate-Inadequate", "Good-Evil" or "Valuable-Worthless".

The modern day customer feedback questionnaire is an example of how this system is used for a trusted evaluation of an event, albeit between two poles.

The semantic space, used in Osgood's research, attempts to pinpoint semantic reactions within its own euclidean framework, with the assumption that there are such things as opposite terms, forming the co-ordinates within which data is captured.

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6   Korzybski, Alfred 'Science and Sanity' pg 24

A for more fluid approach to 'semantic space' could be found in what Neil Postman would call a 'Semantic environment'.

In 'Crazy Talk, Stupid talk' 1976, Postman defines a semantic environment as an environment that includes :

'first of all, people; second their purposes; third, the general rules of the discourse by which such purposes are usually achieved; and fourth the particular talk actually being used in this situation'

These are complex environments and nested within these environments are further 'sub-environments' – for example, the confession box is a sub-environment of religion.

Postman's sketch of such a non-euclidean semantic space reminds us that communication is a situation in which people participate as a consequence of many other transactions of the organism as a whole in an environment. The notion of the 'semantic environment' realises the precarious nature of communications, accepting this as a precondition to work with, a negative first principle from which to derive better communications. He writes:

'The greater ones awareness of the purposes and structures of different semantic environments, the greater ones sensitivity to the precariousness of all social order, that is, of all communication'[7]

The greater awareness Postman talks about here, is to be achieved through our developing a 'meta-semantic' sensibility which he describes as placing ourselves, psychologically, outside the context of any semantic environments so that we can, at least, consider it from multiple perspectives and therefore see the whole more clearly.

If we borrow an analogy from painting, a meta-semantic sensibility may feel similar to a cubist experience; approached from multiple perspectives, and cutting across numerous vectors and planes.

Postman notes the usefulness of meta-semantic questions in the fact that they are:

'….neither a catechism nor an exact science, but a kind of multi-pointed compass which directs where we shall look but not what we shall see'[8]

A multi-pointed compass sounds like a tricky tool for navigation, but can point us in the general direction at least, even if it is used in relation to a map that is not the territory.

A 'semantic environment' for Postman is not so much a constellation of meanings but more of a liminal space that suspends denotation. Postman's 'semantic environments' engender in us a kind of poise in relation to the world and to the constant flow of data.

8.49 - Semantic cue

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7   Postman, Neil: 'Crazy Talk Stupid Talk'
8   Postman, Neil: 'Crazy Talk Stupid Talk' pg 244

PAINTING -

Finally, we will focus upon the semantic environment generated by painting. Or, more clearly, the meta-semantics of the situation.

Since medieval times, painting shows examples of reflecting inward on itself, but it is only recently, that 'meta' qualities of painting have been explicitly referenced and theorised as a trope.

An exhibition at the Prado in Spain, in 2016/17 entitled 'Meta-painting - A journey to the idea of art', focused on paintings that referred to painting itself – for example paintings which included painters painting, figures looking out of the picture – as well as the playful inclusion of a room devoted to depictions of Don Quixote. With reference to Cervantes' 17th century novel as being one of the first examples of 'meta-fiction' or a book within a book.

Prior to this, Victor Stoichita's 1997 book; 'The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting' examines reflexivity in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century painting. Stoichita explores the ways that paintings themselves commented on representation, on the techniques and signifying strategies of oil painting, and on the emerging conventions of collecting and displaying pictures.

One example Stoichita refers to is:

9.36 - El Greco's 'View of Toledo, with map' – 1610/4 –

In this painting, we see El Greco as proto-Korzybskian! – emphasising that the territory and the map are separate whilst ingeniously using the potentials of painting to include the two within the same image.

Of course we don't suggest here that El Greco is predicting Korzybski by three hundred years, however, he is certainly making a conscious statement about the ability of the medium to turn inward. By doing this, the painting communicates on a 'meta' level, and exposes potentials and limitations of the medium. El Greco is illustrating that he cannot show all of the city, whose expanse is better depicted by the map, but also wants to show it's majesty and spirit, which are far better depicted by his landscape.

Prior to the 20th century, the notion of 'the medium' in art, meant the comfortably separate realms of painting, drawing and sculpture – the physical distinctions between each medium held their integrity. These physical boundaries came under scrutiny in the early 20th century, with the advent of Dada and Cubism, for example in Picasso and Braque's relief paintings that were like painted wall based pseudo sculptures – Alfred Jarry's elaborate costumes in the Ubu plays, which looked like forms had leapt out of cubist paintings....

Further on in the mid twentieth century media boundaries came under the intense focus of art critic Clement Greenberg, who developed the theory which came to be known as 'modernism', and is closely associated with the notion of 'medium specificity'.

With this notion, Greenberg sought out 'purity' by suggesting that all paintings and painterly acts were primarily concerned with themselves and the flatness of the structures

and supports on which the brushstrokes were spread, swiped or splattered. For Greenberg, there was little more than this – although this was enough to cultivate a the formalist sensibility.

The term 'medium' became, in Korzybski's parlance, an 'over identified' term. It could not be mentioned without association to the theoretical infrastructure of Modernism. Subsequently, art historians, writers and critics have attempted to distance themselves from term.

This, of course, was noted by Tom Wolfe, in his book 'The Painted Word', in which he states:

'Modern art has become completely literary: the paintings and other works exist only to illustrate the text'[9]

For Wolfe, these painted words flooded the semantic environment of mid 20th century American painting and created what Korzybski might term a confusion of orders of abstraction, or Neil Postman would call 'crazy talk' – the painter followed the theories rather than the other way around, and the whole environment became self perpetuating.

Art historian W.J.T Mitchell has noted, that this critical discourse was as crucial to modernist painting, as the Bible and mythology were to traditional narrative painting.[10]

To try to extricate art criticism from 'medium specificity', Rosalind Krauss coined the term 'Post-medium'. In the preface to her 1992 study 'A voyage on the North Sea' Krauss notes that 'medium specificity' drew attention to limitations of the medium, but ignored more subtle philosophical questions that painting could expose.

For Krauss, earlier attempts at definition of the medium had been stripped of their complexity due to the omnipresence of Modernism's theories. For example, the painter Maurice Denis who writes in 1890:

'It is well to remember that a picture, before being a battle horse, a nude woman or some anecdote – is essentially plain surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order'

Modernist interpretations of such artists insights were used as proof that there was an essentialist reduction towards flatness that implied a specific orthogenesis of Painting. But Dennis's point is more sophisticated, there is a complexity involved in the notion of the 'order', which signifies an awareness of the 'meta' potentials of painting, as Kraus states:

'Denis is describing the layered, complex relationship that we would call a recursive structure – a structure, that is some of the elements of which will produce the rules that generate the structure itself'[11]

The post-medium condition of painting involves less insularity around the mediums limitations and more philosophical curiosity about the potentials of the medium in contemporary culture. Krauss' use of the term 'recursive' references the notion of the thing defined in terms of itself, but also suggests importance of deeper functions of order and sequence in the process.

9   Wolfe, Thom 'The Painted Word' 1975 Picador
10 WJT Mitchell – 'There are no visual media'
11 Krauss Rosalind 'A Voyage on the North Sea' pg 7 - 1992 MIT

The semantic environment cultivated by Kraus' 'Post-medium' condition, imparts a structural re-evaluation, involving the development of a non-elementalistic approach to thinking about the medium – using flatness as a spring board, a base case from which to explore latent potentials of the medium.

Kraus never refers to Korzybski or non-elementalism specifically, but there are further examples of art theorists, critics and historians who develop this more fluid non-elementalistic approach.

In an essay entitled, 'There are no visual media' from 1996 – W J T Mitchell argues for a more nuanced taxonomy of media, using painting as an example because it comes closer to a notion of purity than most other media. Mitchell's argument leads him to declare that all media are mixed media. He writes;

'The very notion of medium already entails some mixture of sensory, perceptual, and semiotic elements. This conclusion does not lead to the impossibility of distinguishing one medium from another. What it makes possible is a more precise differentiation of mixtures'[12]

Differentiation is the key here. Mitchell's argument is that media should be approached, as 'material social practices', and never as having a singular, elemental essence. Media should be viewed more like a recipe in cooking, having different nuances, combinations and ratios of input.

Furthermore, David Joselit's 2009 essay 'Painting is beside itself', actually places painting in an fluid environment by posing the question 'How does a painting belong to a network?'. Describing painting as having a 'transitive' quality, meaning having the ability to 'carry over into an object'.

Joselit imagines painting in such an environment to have:

'...capacity to hold in suspension the passages internal to a canvas, and those external to it. In this regard, painting since the 1990's has folded into itself so called 'institutional critique' without falling into the modernist trap of negation, where works on canvas are repeatedly reduced to degree zero'[13]

It's irresistible to highlight the cooking analogy again here, with the term folding in, which is often used when describing assembling a cake mixture.

This 'folding in' of institutional critique or modernism, identifies how painting, bigger than any theoretic structure that attempts to define it, has absorbed parts of its own structure in the recursive manner highlighted by Kraus.

Painting is not something we can easily isolate from its communicative contexts and transmissions. A further example is found in art historian Isabelle Graw's 2018 book 'The love of painting' (art equivalent of the joy of sex!) For Graw it is impossible to contain painting in the constraints of the canvas when even its own idexicality, marks made, lead to a transcendent quality. Graw writes:

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12 Mitchell WJT ' There are no visual media' 1996 October Journal
13 Joselit, David ' Painting is beside itsel' 2009 October Journal

'Visible brushstrokes and glossy oil paint can trigger a haptic longing to touch the painting's surface. Moreover, these haptic events give rise to what I call 'vitalistic fantasies': for example, the belief, going back to painting theorists of antiquity, that paintings bear some resemblance to their creators'[14]

Graw's comment encompasses both the notion of self reference, and the notion of painting extending beyond itself. Through 'vitalistic fantasies' paintings show the traces of agency, via brushstrokes.

'Vitalistic fantasies' remind us that an organism, a person, has made the object and this creates a ghostlike quality of authorship or 'spectural presences' - leading to Graw describing paintings as quasi-persons. As well as this, Graw invokes the haptic potentials of painting, invoking a synaesthetic quality to our experiencing of the medium.

Given these examples, an accurate evaluation of painting, more in line with 'what is going on', identifies the relation between the inside and outside of the canvas, it is not necessarily a visual phenomena, but should be experienced more as an organism as a whole in an environment.

In this way, perhaps Painting, and criticism of painting is becoming more 'similar in structure', as Korzybski would say, to the subject of it's investigation, and more allingned to the sensory networks that apprehend it.

12.30 - Bob Ross and Thanatos

By way of concluding our study:

Graw's analysis alludes to the fact that ideas of the dissolution of boundaries in painting, are by no means unique to contemporary culture, but were present in antiquity and suggested throughout post marxist art criticism.

But we find that attitudes towards the genesis of painting, especially in the twentieth century, have shifted from expansive (with Dada/cubism) to constrictive (with Modernism) and now as our examples from Krauss, Graw, Joselit and Mitchell show, we are looking at the medium in an 'expanded field'.

There is another commonality in the theories that we have explored – all refer to ideas of structure and differentiation.

These two ideas are fundamental to General semantics, as we are aware, the functioning tool of the system, the 'Structural Differential', enables us to train our awareness in these characteristics which are vital to accurate evaluation.

In describing the 'Structural Differential' J Samuel Bois highlights:

'..it's name clearly shows Korzybski's concern for two key ideas a) *differences,* which make each person, thing or situation unique in space and time, and b) *structure,* which accounts for the inner arrangement of parts – or elements – of each unique person or thing, or situation abstracted as a distinct whole from the cosmic space-time flow'[15]

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14 Graw Isabelle, 'The love of painting' 2018 pg 20
15 'Art of Awareness' Bois, J Samuel pg134 1966 W.M Brown and Co

Whilst still recognising that which is unique to painting; it's difference, the theories we have encountered argue for a more fluid notion of structure, involving a dispersion of boundaries, but not, as a result, a dissolution from a central core of specific uniquenesses.

Kraus's sketch of the 'post-medium' condition implies a structural revision that leaves behind the husk of modernism in order to incorporate 'painting-as-a-whole'

Mitchell sees painting as part of a larger network or communicative structure which must involve a more nuanced taxonomy of media, or a 'differentiation of mixtures' as he puts it.

Joselit sees painting as besides itself, having stepped out of its structure, physical and theoretical, via it's transitive qualities.

And for Graw we now accept the remarkable idea that painting can be totally disembodied from the traditional canvas or support and can still be present as 'quasi person' – painting can exist without painting. (Broodthaers)

If we agree with Korzybski, that the content of knowledge is exclusively structural, we see that these theories advocate an approach which is more similar in structure to the world. Painting is a tool which can cultivate our awareness of this '-as-a-whole-in-an-environment' orientation.

Does this mean that art theory is becoming more Korzybskian and therefore more 'sane'? And does this mean that our experience of 'art' and specifically painting, can be regarded as an exercise in re-aligning our sensibilities and becoming better General Semanticists?

I ,for one, certainly hope so....