Crazy, Stupid, Talking Painting – Dom Heffer

IGS seminar 2017

Somebody once said, that talking about art was like trying to kiss through a telephone….I can't remember who said it…it wasn't Harvey Weinstein…

Anyway, in this work, which has been made especially for this event, we will explore discourse around art. Using Neil Postmans' framework of the 'semantic environment' we will see how Painters and audiences of art can often have negative semantic reactions through a misevaluation of such environments. We will explore the prevalence of Aristotelian orientations in art and investigate a meta-semantic approach to the discourse which 'suspends' itself in order to be both participating and observing communication. The imagery that will be playing on screen is a practical attempt at such 'suspension' during the process of image making - an attempt at what David Bohm termed 'proprioception of thought' or thought observing and participating in itself.

The presentation will feature gaps in the verbal narrative where the visual elements will speak more loudly.

1. EVALUATING MODERN ART

Talking about painting can be difficult. Conscientious artists are aware of the pitfalls of words, but recognise the necessity to use these tools to theorise about their processes. For example, Francis Bacon stated that you could only talk *around* painting. The German artist Gerhard Richter described how:

"By conveying a thing through the medium of language, you change it. You construct qualities that can be said, and you leave out the ones that can't be said" [1]

Richter highlights the disparity between the map and the territory here. It seems that in the artists' scepticism, or wisdom, there is an inherent understanding of what Korzybski would have called a 'confusion of orders of abstraction' as well as a sense of consciousness of abstraction. In fact, Richter's comment resonates with the definition of 'consciousness of abstraction' in Science and Sanity, which states the purpose of 'remembering the 'is not' and that some characteristics have been left out'[2]

In general semantics terms, we could suggest that when we attempt to verbalise marks and patches of colour on a 2-D surface, we are complicit in a confusion of 'orders of abstraction'. Korzybski's diagnosis of this reads:

'when we confuse the orders of abstraction and ascribe objective reality to terms and symbols, or confuse conclusions and inferences with descriptions, a great deal of semantic suffering is produced'[3]

The suffering is caused by over-identification. It is clear that painting is an endeavour that involves abstraction from reality, but artists, art critics and audiences still find it necessary

[1] Notes, 1964-65 Richter

[2] Korzybski, Alfred 'Science and Sanity' - 'The Mechanism of Time Binding' 1933

[3] Korzybski, 'Science and Sanity', pg 499

to assert binary distinctions between 'representational' approaches to painting and 'abstract' approaches. This tendency is deep rooted in 'modernism'. In representational art, where the artist recreates a recognisable thing, there is perhaps more of a tendency for over-identification to occur because of the painting's pre-determined commitments.

This is explored in Oliver Bloodsteins 1943 paper 'General Semantics and Modern art'. Bloodstein analyses the difficulties the observer can have in evaluation of 'Modern art', mainly caused when confronted by the newness of 'abstraction' when evaluations are on a 'representational' channel. To put this another way: those who have adverse semantic reactions when confronted with works that were 'non-representational', have out dated tools for evaluation, therefore, they feel alienated from the semantic environment. We could literally say, that they lack consciousness of abstraction(!). Bloodstein finds this curious, he notes the positive potentials of painting as a more direct semantic code, he states:

'In many ways the symbols used in Painting are less arbitrary, more direct, than the symbols of language'[4]

Bloodstein notes that symbolic structure of painting, should actually be freer from insidious semantic reactions related to linguistic structures. This should be even more so with 'Modern art' which brings into awareness the structural make-up of painting, such as relationships of form, colour, and flatness of picture plane. 'Abstract' Painting should remind us that paintings are not the things that they symbolise - therefore, our comments should have a clearer empirical basis. Bloodstein continues:

'older painters had tended to identify the Paintings with the objects painted, and to assume that these objects constituted 'reality', but the moderns based their art on consciousness of abstracting, emphasising the 'to me' character of the process'[5]

As a result of this, the audiences that encountered these Paintings for the first time found that they had nothing to hook the images on to, no co-ordinates on the map. For many of the audiences, this was seen as an abrupt anti-social action which created what we could call a 'rupture' in the 'semantic environment'. For me, it is the presence of this kind 'rupture' which indicates a powerful creative statement is at hand, this is possibly one of the key functioning characteristics of an effective work of art.

3.32

---

[4] Ibid

[5] Ibid

2 SEMANTIC ENVIRONMENTS - 3.32

Neil Postmans' term 'semantic environment' is of great use. It conjures images of a space rich with transmissions; palpable but tenuous. It is suggestive of the organic nature of human-made communications environments, instead of the world of rigid little boxes. We are reminded of Foucault's statement:

'Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may also be said to exist in transmission, in communication'[6]

How we transmit, how we communicate, and the environments this creates are the basis of any genuine analysis of discourse, art included. But to analyse this effectively, we need to be aware of the ingredients of such environments, as they are always multi-faceted. Postman describes:

'A semantic environment 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 the situation'[7]

When confronted with abstract painting, 'purposes' were bought into question, general rules of discourse around painting were dissolved by these strange object which few people knew how to evaluate. 'Ruptures' were caused in the semantic environment because art is made by it's discourse. The talk around an art object gives it oxygen. As the American philosopher Arthur Danto explains:

'It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the art world, and art possible. It would, I should think, never have occurred to the cave painters of Lascaux that they were producing 'art' on those walls'[8]

The cave painters at Lascaux (who interestingly where stylistically close to modernists) whilst still in a semantic environment of some kind, did not have an environment created by such a multi-ordinal notion as 'art'. Danto's description supports Postman's observation of 'talk being used in the situation' being responsible for the situation. The art object is given its buoyancy by the discourse or semantic environment engulfing it and fanning its flames. But as experienced with Modern art's audicity and strangeness, the art object has the potential to cause a tear in the fabric of the semantic environment which requires a recalibration and transformation in our reactions.

This reaction can be similar to 'shock' but we should be careful to differentiate between the notion of producing 'shock' and a 'rupture'. In much of contemporary art, there seems to be the necessity to 'shock' - But Shock is easily achieved, for example, by use of imagery that is explicit or gratuitous ,an abrasive or unexpected incursion into the semantic environment. What we mean when we talk about a 'Rupture' is a more seismic reaction, a plate shift, which disseminates into the environment - a rupture can be a catalyst, it sets in

---

[6] Michel Foucault: Personal Autonomy and Education, By J.D. Marshall

[7] Postman, 'Crazy Talk Stupid Talk' pg 9

[8] Danto, Arthur C 'The Artworld - Journal of Philosophy'

motion, if positive, a recalibration of the semantic environment. 'Shock' can be assimilated, absorbed, we become inured to such tactics, especially in art, a 'rupture' on the other hand, is a less consciously orchestrated transmission with positive and negative potentials depending upon how we react with our evaluations.

6.56

MAP 3. 'THIS IS NOT ART!'   6:56

A common reaction to a 'rupture' in the semantic environment caused by an 'artwork', is to declare frustratedly 'This is not art!' - I'm sure that we have all done this at some point inwardly or outwardly. You may even be doing it now! I certainly used to experience this kind of semantic reaction often, before I started to practice non-aristotelianism….

GUGGENHIEM STOP

One of the most stunning examples I have witnessed of such a rupture, was at the Guggenheim, last time I was in New York. The sculptor Doris Salcedo had a show there. Her practice often involves installations and sculptures that use found objects to articulate resonant memories. One work in particular, entitled 'Unland: Audible in the mouth' is made of a fusion of two old wooden tables which look as if covered in a thin layer of dust or cobwebs.

SALCEDO STOP

Into the gallery came a gentleman aged around 60, who stopped as soon as he beheld these two tables, his face grew red with anger, and he turned to the gallery attendant and bellowed in a strong teutonic accent: 'You call this art?! A couple of dusty old tables! This is not art!' - and at this he stomped out of the room. Leaving the poor gallery attendant with a look on his face that said 'i don't get paid enough for this'….

If our critic had taken a few steps closer to Salcedo's work he would have noticed that the 'dusty old tables' were in fact covered in thousands of hand sewn strands of silk and human hair which gave the tables it's dusty veneer.

If he had been a non-aristotelean, he would have been less aggressive to our gallery attendant. He may have noticed that by proclaiming 'This is not art' he was over identifying the phenomena of the table, with his preconceived ideas about what art should be…in Postman's terms, he was defeating himself by the way he spoke.

PLAY

If only he was an avid reader of Korzybski, he would have 'suspended' his reactions, he would perhaps start a discourse with the gallery attendant in which he might say - 'according to my evaluation of what art is, which is largely influenced by Painting of the 1890's, this object does not fit into my definition of the term' After this, he may even move closer to the work, and, instead of recoiling in horror.This is all wishful thinking on our behalf - We can only hope that our critic went straight to the exit and not into the next room, in which he would have found an installation comprising a variety of wardrobes, full to the brim with cement.

I include this anecdote as an example of a harmful semantic reaction and a response to a 'rupture' that had the knock on effect of creating a secondary 'rupture' in the environment of the gallery space. It is also an example of how the aristotelian orientation of the gentleman's thinking, based on 'this is art/this is not art' binary, lead to a negative response rather than a more open dialogue within his environment.

The 'This is not art' response is a prime example of an Aristotelian orientation which leads down a philosophical cul-de-sac. A more positive and accurate evaluation could be achieved by adding the extensional device of indexing - so that instead we say 'for observer 1, the object 'a' does not constitute 'art''.

But the semantic environment of the art world has long had a strong amount of Aristotelianism in its evaluations. Art Historian Alana Jelinek, explores this binary tendency in her 2013 book 'This is not art' where she devotes a chapter to what has been referred to as the 'Art-Life' dichotomy during the mid to late 20th century. Her analysis focuses on the notion of art that engages with 'life' and is community driven and 'art for art's sake' ,which becomes associated with abstract art and is commodity driven.

In describing semantic environments around 'Modern' art, Jelinek writes:

'we have uncritically accepted a binary model as part of our inheritance: Greenberg casts a long shadow. Historical truths are inherently contestable but history is always more complex than a binary model describes[9]

Jelinik asserts that binary models are outdated and based upon miss-evaluations, but despite this, still prevalent in our dialogue about art. The shadow caster mentioned, American critic Clement Greenberg, was responsible for championing abstract Painting and 'art for art's sake'. Greenberg worked towards describing what was 'unique and irreducible' to the medium of painting. This, he stated was it's 'flatness and delimitation of flatness' making paintings primarily objects. But Greenberg's theory could not account for a number of artists who did not fit into this schema, it also did not engage other theories about modernist Painting, like Harold Rosenbergs theories of Painters performing actions on canvases rather than being acutely aware of 'flatness'. Another reductive element in Greenberg's analysis is the notion of modern art being insular, in a talk entitled 'Antinomies of modern art' given in 1980, he states:

'art can be discussed illuminatingly all by itself, as though taking place in an area of experience that's autonomous, a place that doesn't have to be connected with any other area of experience in order to have sense made of it'[10]

For Greenberg, this inward looking quality implies a purity and integrity. Artworks are things in themselves. This further validated the notion of a personalised symbolic space, an existential bubble in which to create and talk about artworks. It suggests a constriction of the notion of a semantic environment, a delimitated aesthetic plane, that operates with pre-determined restrictions. Greenberg states:

'the abstract picture seems to offer a narrower, more physical and less imaginative kind of experience than the illusionist picture, it appears to do so without the nouns and transitive verbs of the language of Painting'[11]

Whist Greenberg does not claim one methodology is better than an other, he implies that the 'language of painting' when exorcised leaves us with a cleaner semantic environment, albeit one with a thinner atmosphere.

[9] Jelenik, Alana ' This is not art' I.B Taurus 2013

[10] Greenberg, Clement 'Antinomies of Modern art' - talk - 1980 Mount Lake University, Virginia

[11] Greenberg, Clement 'Abstract, representational and so forth...' 1961

Greenberg's motives may well have been to establish a more empirical basis from which to begin the evaluation of works of art. It would be harsh to call them over simplistic, or to apply Postman's definition of 'Crazy Talk' as a 'simple-minded conception of a complex relationship', but with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Greenberg's theories proved too narrow to explain or evaluate any of the movements in art that followed Modernist Painting, such as conceptual art, postmodernism, performance art, arte povera etc etc….It seems more fitting, therefore, that we apply Postman's diagnosis of *language that cannot get outside of itself and buries itself in its own foundations'* to Greenberg's discussions about Modernism.

If Greenberg had read Postman, perhaps he would have taken a 'meta-semantic' stance and his evaluations would have been able to step aside from the narrow contexts, flat picture planes and insularities.

TIME TO POINT ?

11.55

4. META-SEMANTICS   11.55

In the final chapter of 'Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk', Postman sets up the term 'Meta - semantics'. It is key for understanding his approach to the problems in a semantic environment and a basis to counteract poor evaluation. Postman describes it in the following way:

'The fundamental strategy of meta-semantics is to put ourselves, psychologically, outside the context of any semantic environment so that we may see it in its entirety, or at least from multiple perspectives'[12]

The idea of viewing something from multiple perspectives immediately conjures up ideas of cubist painting. In fact, it seems that what is required is a kind of 'cubism of consciousness' - a simultaneous awareness of different viewpoints, encased in a secondary awareness of suspending these viewpoints. This indicates a shifting from 'participant' to 'participant-observer' as it creates, as Postman claims, 'willing suspension of belief, and a heightening of interest in the process of communication'[13] Meta-semantic approaches provoke questions about the why's and how's of communication. Through considering the why's and how's we can begin to disentangle ourselves from context and see things through a more multi-faceted lens.

Whilst Postman does not go into great detail about what this state might feel like, I believe that something analogous to meta-semantic experiencing can be found in David Bohm's definition of the term 'suspension'. In his book 'On dialogue', which is a call for deep listening and more effective communication, there is a chapter entitled 'Suspension, the body and proprioception' in which Bohm explains:

'In the process of suspension, you may notice two things. First, that physical reactions are

---

[12] Postman. Neil 'Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk' Pg 237

[13] I.b.i.d

*being produced by thought, and therefore are not as significant as they would be if they were not being produced by thought. Second, you can get direct evidence that the thoughts are affecting the feelings and the feelings are affecting the thoughts without passing through **me**'[14]*

Suspension allows us to feel ourselves as this conduit through which these fleeting reactions occur. Causes are recognised, transmissions observed. 'Suspension' is about being both participant and observer, holding reactions in abeyance. Bohm calls for observation of thought, as something essential for solving problems created by mankind.Through centuries of conditioning, the mind has caught itself in paradoxes largely due to the way we think, and it so follows that we mistake the resulting difficulties as 'human problems' or difficulties in the external world. Bohm suggests, that by a cultivated observation and analysis of our thinking, we can begin tackle these problems at their roots, in the entanglement in our erroneous thinking. 'Suspension' is a first step towards this, cultivating a deeper awareness of our ways of thinking.

Our relationship with 'art' can be a useful experience in which to remember this suspension since it is clear that we participate and observe at the same time. So when you are in the presence of an artwork, remember our friend at the Guggenheim, who by now, has probably had an aneurism. And before you find yourself thinking 'this is not art' remember your meta-semantics.

14.36

Thank you

---

[14] Bohm, David 'On Dialogue' pg 85, 1996 Routledge