

ART TO UNDERSTAND

Imagine you are deaf and blind, as the American Helen Keller, born in 1880. Through continuous repetition and assimilation of a sign system into her hand, thus only touch, she finally managed to understand what language is, that everything has a name, which gave her the possibility to communicate with the world. Children with learning difficulties need to be taught language in a special way. The visual quality of symbols is often used to make them familiar with written language and next with language in general. Here language comes close to art and I think it is interesting to see in how far art is a language, as so often is stated, and if works made by artists could be used to help children understand language better. My main focus will be on conceptual art, because there's a conscious link to thoughts, concepts and language.

Language and art are both often seen as a representation of the world. It's better though to say it's a perception, because interpretation and the mental set are the basis of representation. Especially conceptual artists perceived the world – its political and social circumstances in that period, like the Vietnam War, the counterculture, feminism, the civil rights movement - and reacted to it. One could even question if representing is at all a feature of conceptual art, as it's not about the physicality of the world, but the processes in it. "Conceptual art is not so much an art movement or vein as it is a position or worldview, a focus on activity"¹. The philosopher Wittgenstein has concentrated much of his work on the idea that language cannot be taught with ostensive teaching and that the meaning is not in the object or the word, but in the use of the word. A word can't really have a definition in his view. It is a 'social aspect of cognition', emerged from culture and society, different for every individual. Similarly there is this emphasis on process in conceptual art which results in art-as-life and life-as-art, concerning Lucy Lippard. Obviously, the closer art comes to life, the more it tells about it and could teach someone else about an aspect of life. You could split the world in two parts; the physical and the abstract one. Kosuth plays in a way with the physical side in his 'One and three chairs', but showing how something tangible has in fact got more dimensions. Dan Graham uses already much more abstract ideas, like numbers, in his work. The reference to existence, the process of life, is in many works noticeable. In my opinion conceptual art would be particularly useful for the teaching of abstract concepts, as you can easily attach a word to an object, but how much more difficult is it to make a child understand mathematics, the idea of death, happiness and so on. Sol LeWitt for example with his many versions of a cube is close to logical thinking, playing with possibility and diversity. On Kawara does the same with the human being, in "I am still alive".

All these works try to free themselves from the visual result and trace back their existence into the mind of the artist; to the concept created at the beginning. One of the sentences on conceptual art by LeWitt is that a concept consists of ideas, which I understand as thoughts. In a way, both language and conceptual art are a result and evidence of existence. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as well as the conviction of Wittgenstein denotes that language determines thought. We have language and therefore we think and one could add Descartes philosophy: "therefore I am"². The same attempt to trace back the thought happens in conceptual art as I describes above. Yet I am not too sure if conceptual art has succeeded in this. According to Whorf's part of the hypothesis, translating one language into another is in fact impossible, because the same words in two languages have a different meaning, cultivated by culture differences. Applying this idea to art, translating thought into words causes the same problem, and a change in meaning will occur. It is impossible to show an idea, because it's being changed by the very moment we put it into language. "Reformulating something transforms the ways in which meanings may be made with it, and in this sense, form and content are inseparable."³. The combination of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis with Freud's theory says that the process of translating starts at the unconscious thought, which is through language made into conscious thought. The question is whether conceptual artists would ever be able to get to this source - the unconscious thought - and be able to express this without starting the whole process. So in both art and language there is the same problem: not being able to give a pure view of the world, if there is one truth at all. But whereas in conceptual art this is not seen as a problem, although the aim is to get closest to thought, in language one tries as hard as possible to get to this core so that we can understand and communicate better.

¹ Ken Friedman (in 1971) quoted in Lippard, 'The dematerialization of the art object', p.x

² Although I am linking Descartes' and Wittgenstein's view on thought, they do differ slightly. Descartes doubted the existence of the external world including his own body and believed he could only be sure of his own thinking. Wittgenstein on the other hand believed that language, which is fundamentally a social activity is essential for thought. A private language doesn't exist.

³ Stanley Fish quoted in <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/short/whorf.html>

Until now, I tried to bring up some similarities in content, but as I just said, it is inseparable from the form. Language and art converge in my view at the fundamentals of written language. Not only am I talking about hieroglyphs, but also Chinese, in which there are still traces left of the first characters which were pictographs. In both, little drawings of objects were used as a word and were in fact representations of the world. This writing system wasn't sufficient for abstractions, so that Chinese developed the 'compound ideographs' or 'associative compounds', characters that are built up from two or more elements to create a new meaning (e.g. sun + moon = bright⁴). In the same way, the method to teach children with learning difficulties a written language and help them understand language in general, is through pictures⁵. It is very important that these children not only learn the simple words that can be drawn, but also those abstract terms which our world is full of. Studies have shown that deaf children having hearing parents do worse in some cognitive tasks, because these parents are less fluent in sign language, in contrast to deaf children with deaf parents⁶. Teaching children the full variety of words from our common language would influence their thinking a lot. Malinowski has put it very well in words. His view, based on research of holistic pictures, is that pictorial messages are better for showing information about relationships, for communion. On the contrary, a sequence of written words gives more semantic clarity because of its complexity and abstraction. Therefore it classifies more for communication and he supposes this is the reason that language won over pictures in the end when human civilization started to develop.⁷

The group Art & Language was very much aware of the form of art in that period and they even think the form is "governed by the form of the conventional signs of written language".⁸ An important remark is that "the content of the artist's idea is expressed through the semantic qualities of the written language". But before we can accept that conceptual art is conceived as a written language, stylized from retinal art into concept in the same way Chinese did, it's necessary to understand under which conditions something visual can be called 'written language'. Chao believes in his book on 'Language and symbolic systems' that a visual symbol needs to have a close correspondence to language if it wants to be writing. He says that "if a sign represents a specific part of language, it is writing; if it represents things directly, it is not."⁹ In the same way Goodman argues that "Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance"¹⁰. It would be difficult to say that the use of an art work has got a close correspondence to a linguistic form, and just one. A work that would represent a conceptual thought could be shown and understood in so many different ways, that it can never be a symbol for one spoken word. The seeing of a work won't imply just one specific form of language, as the idea was that it would be separate of language. It's very difficult thus to apply the whole idea of written language onto conceptual art, except of the idea that it is independent of resemblance – it doesn't need to be a picture. Perhaps only if the art was again simplified, as happened to Chinese, could it be writing. Conceptual art would, as most systems of writings have, develop from pictorial representation, morphemes, into alphabetic forms, phonemes.

I would like to challenge to what extend the visual aspect of conceptual art should be complex. Language is supposed to bring us meaning and understanding, or in other words knowledge. Wittgenstein's believe in 'meaning is use' is comparable with John Locke's statement that knowledge comes through the senses. Meaning is thus best created through all the senses. A work of art affecting all our senses has in the past been called a 'Gesamtkunstwerk'. This idea results obviously in the opposite of conceptual art, but I question if this way of bringing over a meaning wouldn't put a child in a total state of abstraction? This idea is confirmed by a quotation in 'Origins of semiosis: sign evolution in nature and culture' that to see significance in communication, there has to be talk of polarization. Conceptual works describes by Art & Language as only being worthy of its name when not using any 'art objects', would such works be able to bring anything over to a person who still needs to be 'filled'? Would Keith Arnatt's "Is It Possible for Me to Do Nothing as My Contribution to This Exhibition?" from 1970 be able to give meaning to a concept? For a child there needs to be a pattern or relationships in what you perceive.¹¹ Such a redundancy in art would suit the switch-over from modernism into

⁴ Chao, Yuen Ren, 'Language and symbolic systems', p103

⁵ There is a difference in the teaching of children with learning difficulties using a symbol system and children with a handicap that need a different means of communicating, like the manual sign language. Still, although the manual sign language is much closer to common language, there is the difficulty to make deaf and blind children understand what language is, especially words for abstractions.

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>

⁷ Malinowski (in 1923) in Nöth, Winfried ed., 'Origins of semiosis: sign evolution in nature and culture', p. 444

⁸ 'Art & Language, 'Editorial introduction to Art-Language', p. 873

⁹ Chao, Yuen Ren, 'Language and symbolic systems', p.101

¹⁰ Goodman, Nelson, 'Languages of art: an approach to a theory of symbols', p.5

¹¹ Nöth, Winfried ed., 'Origins of semiosis: sign evolution in nature and culture', p. 439

postmodernism, I mean the cross-fertilization between the once so self-contained disciplines¹². On the other hand, the Australian artist Ian Burn (early member of Art & Language) would object to this idea, saying that "Presentation is a problem because it can easily become a form in itself, and this can be misleading. I would always opt for the most neutral format, one that doesn't interfere with or distort the information."¹³ There is a point where complexity and simplicity of art could meet in my view. It would work similarly to our alphabet, although I'd prefer to compare it to the binary system to keep it more abstract and simple. By using a couple of simple elements you can create a whole lot of different arrangements, but unlikely the alphabet where form is very often not linked to meaning, in this 'art-language' it would. To make this clearer I want to bring forward a similar idea in language that was developed by George Dalgrano, in the 17th century¹⁴. His idea was that the whole world could be classified, and that this classification could be reflected in language: every letter of a word states a further step in classifying the thing, so that the last letter finishes the series and makes clear what the thing is. Although this seems a very simple and easy system, the book argues that redundancy is necessary – there have to be more elements in a system than the minimum – in case there's a defect somewhere, so that these extra elements can keep the system working. Almost unnecessary to add is of course the basic question in how far we're able to classify our world.

I do think that artists like LeWitt came quite close to such a system. On Kawara sent a telegraph to Sol LeWitt: "I am still alive, On Kawara", and LeWitt used this message for a piece in which he made 74 permutations of the words. In a sense, this is also about arrangements of the same elements, but instead of letters he did this with words, creating different meanings. It is almost an attempt described by Wittgenstein, that when you make all possible combinations and arrangements of language, you get to the limits of reality. The limits of language are the limits of reality. Furthermore, the use of repetition is part of classification. An example could be the work of Roman Opalka, photographing himself every day. Every picture looks the same in structure, but the end details which change all the time, tell the final difference between these men: a different age in every photograph. This would nicely suit the description LeWitt made of conceptual art in his 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art': "Using a simple form repeatedly narrows the field of the work and concentrates the intensity to the arrangement of the form."¹⁵ Also the Bechers have used photography to show the same, but slightly different buildings in their series. A series of buildings shows structures in which function, shape and material can be the same in all, or different in all¹⁶. They consciously follow logical organizational schemes. Of course, this kind of photography is rather a sort of realistic illustration. Especially in this case it's leaving behind all symbolic, anecdotal and expressive potential.

We have to keep in mind that conceptual art doesn't need to provide meaning in just one way. Both language and art, and their predecessors 'thought' and 'concept' are something very personal, a different world in every individual, so that in providing us a feeling of meaning could perhaps be in a variety of ways. Giving one final definition would be wrong. For is it not that in the more different situations children use a word they are learning the meaning of, the better they will understand its meaning(s) and will be able to use it in the future? It is very likely, I think, that introducing children to a form of art could help them in language. The National Council for Educational Technology says in their booklet that "Children become used to 'reading' pictures, accessing meaning and information from them, so the transition to reading symbols is far less demanding than being introduced immediately to the squiggles that make up traditional print."¹⁷ And perhaps those children who were brought up with a sign language will be even more able to 'read' conceptual art than children starting with common language.

¹² Rorimer, Anne, 'New Art in the 60s and 70s', p. 11

¹³ Lippard, 'The dematerialization of the art object', p. xx

¹⁴ Matthews, P.H., 'A Very Short Introduction. Linguistics', p.21

¹⁵ Harrison, Charles, 'Essays on Art & Language', p. 835

¹⁶ Rorimer, Anne, 'New Art in the 60s and 70s', p. 122

¹⁷ National Council for Educational Technology, 'Symbols in practice', p. 9

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