Curated Intentions and The Art of Interpretation

How artistic interpretation is influenced by opposing interpretative theories in conjunction with curatorial practices

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on two different sites of artistic interpretation of visual material; the site of the image itself and the site of audiencing, in order to study how they work with one another to influence viewer interpretation.

At the site of the image itself, the research explores the production of meaning within contemporary visual culture by examining the strengths and weaknesses of the main analytical theories of interpretation; anti-intentionalism and intentionalism. At the site of audiencing these theories are observed in conjunction with their practical curatorial applications within the exhibition setting.

By studying these opposing theories, the research not only reveals the origins, methods and motives behind the Scopic Regime and the history of educating audiences in ways of seeing, entangled with curatorial visions, but also explores the relevance of space (visual economy), author (auteur theory), and curation in defining the value of art, in comparison to the agency of the work itself and the surrounding visual discourse.

This thesis also examines how the practical and curatorial application of these interpretative theories can shift understanding, visibility and authorship. And how these can be used to design alternative curatorial approaches that create more interesting, fair and novel interpretations, challenging hierarchies of visibility that work beyond the institution and its interests.

Keywords Curation, Authorship, Interpretation, Meaning, Intentionalism, Anti-Intentionalism

Disclaimer

While having worked towards an informed and balanced approach to this topic, my research has been inevitably affected by my background and position as both artist and researcher. I have been greatly inspired by my studies in Cultural, Curatorial and Contemporary Art Theory, as well as Philosophy of Art. In conjunction with my academic studies, this thesis has drawn from personal interests and experiences as an artist and curator.

Furthermore, although I am based in Finland and carry my Finnish and Peruvian roots, I have lived a culturally rich yet nomadic life, moving countries every two to three years, all of which have had their unique input on my research. Perhaps it is the reason why I felt that I could not limit myself to one area, while also considering the incipience of modern curation as a practice. My interest in the specific media chosen for this thesis reflects the preference for the visual material I create myself as an oil painter and serves as representation of one of the most traditional practices in art- one which many claim to be dead but is far from it.

In this thesis I have attempted to expand the long-established theoretical knowledge and debates about interpretation and illustrate their practical applications in the contemporary art scene. The ones that have already been put into play, and suggestions for alternative improvements in future methods of exhibition making. Challenges have arisen in the comparison of the written and the visual as they operate within very different structural dimensions, and therefore cannot be judged based on the same criterion. The issue is founded in the language of curatorial practices when used to describe art objects created out of the inadequacy of the written/spoken language. I have tried my best to show the entanglement of theory and practice while respecting the autonomy of each.

“The contextualization of space and its rhetoric have been overshadowed by the context of art in terms of epochs and artists’ works, despite the fact that exhibition installations have had such a crucial significance for how meaning is created in art.”

***The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse* -** Paul O’Neill

Introduction

As an artist I am always followed by the question 'what does your work mean?' and struggle to find a balance between maintaining a level of mystery or the over saturation of information; risking misinterpretation or otherwise robbing the viewer of the chance to generate meaning on their own terms. When looking at artwork one is confronted by this foreseeable question, 'what does it mean?' or 'what did the artist intend?'. These however are two very different approaches to interpretation. The former is concerned with a general attribution of meaning to visual material in which the method is not specified. The latter inquiry looks for meaning by shifting its focus to the author and their artistic intentions as the basis for the understanding of the work. The way one interprets visual material will have an effect on the meaning one derives from it, and therefore its impact. In this research, it is important to acknowledge the centrality of images within and beyond visual culture[1] and discourse. The way we understand visual material and the way we form interpretations *are* not and *should* not be considered autonomous, independent or automatic.

In this thesis I will be borrowing the categorisation system developed in *Visual Methodologies* by Gillian Rose, which explores the critical analysis of visual material through different sites of interpretation (see Appendix A). For the purpose of my research, I will be looking at two of these four sites; the site of the image itself (the artwork) and the site of audiencing (the exhibition setting[2]), which will be broken down into three modalities. The technological modality (tools used for the display of images) and the compositional modality (visual construction, and qualities of visual material) will be central to my research. The social modality will only be considered in relation to the institutional practices that generate and interpret art, rather than socio-political, cultural and/or personal factors that influence the reception and interpretation of artwork. I will be using both practical and theoretical work for the comprehension of the presented arguments; from essays and case studies, to interviews and close examination of artworks. Additionally, my research will only refer to physical visual material, rather than digital or sensorial media[3]. Focusing primarily on figurative visual artwork and conceptual pieces as counterarguments.

The first chapter will primarily explore the compositional modalities of artwork within the site of the image itself, through the examination of the strengths and weaknesses of opposing theories of artistic interpretation; intentionalism and anti-intentionalism, as well as other moderate positions.

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[1] Visual culture refers to the centrality of visual images within society amidst the larger power structures and influences embedded in our ocularcentric modern reality.
[2] The other two sites not mentioned here include the site of production and the site of circulation (Rose, 2016).
[3] This includes performance art.

This chapter will also briefly establish the definition of ‘meaning’, ‘intention’ and ‘interpretation’ to clarify and determine their use in the rest of the thesis.
The second chapter will move on to the site of audiencing, exploring the establishment of authorship, the systematic design and original purpose of art museums, the rise of the contemporary curator as producer of meaning and the concept of the ‘perfect viewer’.

The third chapter will look at the technological modality of the site of audiencing, surveying different curatorial arrangements and their unique effects on interpretation.

The fourth and final chapter will discuss the applications and implications of curatorial approaches that favour intentionalism and anti-intentionalism, while considering the tacit dominance of discourse over both theories and offering a personal alternative.

Through my research, I hope to offer a better understanding of the methods that generate meaning in visual culture and the way in which artistic interpretation is not mutually exclusive with curation. The exploration of these theories of artistic interpretations and those which are supported by artistic institutions, have the potential to affect our understanding of cultural appropriation, address the value of the art market, define our views on censorship as well as question the centrality of the author figure both artistically and curatorially, and how the lack of such a proclivity might offer new perspectives in artistic discourse and practice.

Chapter 1

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The Site of the Image Itself

‘You don't judge our art, our art judges you!’

Figure 1: Zygotic Acceleration, Biogenetic, De-Sublimated Libidinal Model by Jake & Dinos Chapman, 1995, 150 cm x 180 cm x 140 cm

In the autumn of 2021, I attended a talk led by British researcher Paula Smithard who was visiting my former college, University of the Arts London. Smithard opened the discussion with the quote “You don't judge our art, our art judges you!” (Smithard, 2021) and the image seen above (see Figure 1). The lecture hall was drowned in whispers, and everyone consulted their neighbour to exchange their initial opinions about the piece. With visual work, the first impressions are born from what one physically sees. In this case, the image depicted a circle of young ‘doll-like’ girls conjoined by their melting torsos, naked, all but for their identical athletic designer shoes and ‘bob’ hairstyles. Moreover, some figures had grotesque and deformed facial features in which the nose had been replaced by male genitalia. With this information, the viewer may have already considered multiple possible meanings in an attempt to unravel the work. Yet, if we are unsatisfied with our own interpretation we can look for aid outside the physical properties of the artwork. For example, the title of the work, *Zygotic Acceleration, Biogenetic De-Sublimated Libidinal Model*, is essential in confirming or debunking some of the viewer's initial ideas. More importantly, any available information about the artistic intentions provided by the artists themselves is commonly accepted as the best source of information. In this case, Dinos Chapman, one of the creators of the piece, said “Essentially, the thing that binds everything together is humour - the darkest kind of humour possible. Because that's the way that you defend yourself from the horror." (Ingram, 2018). But what about looking into other secondary sources of information that can shed even more light into the meaning of the work, such as the artist’ cultural background, style, or method? Jake and Dinos Chapman had their start in the 1990s, becoming an integral part of the YBA (Young British Artists) movement that shook contemporary visual culture. Equipped with a hunger to stir things up and a wide range of media, the brothers came to be known for their morally questionable creations, as well as their modification/appropriation of other people’s work. Today their provocative pieces have been praised and condemned in almost equal parts.

For this piece it is also significant to know that when it was first displayed at London’s Victoria Miro gallery the public was so shocked and revolted by the ‘in your face’ and controversial work that the police were called in. Nonetheless, according to the brothers this response “only served to highlight the same contradictions that the piece sought to challenge - the mannequins were... an amalgamation of imagery that was already widely accessible and available to most viewers.” (Ingram, 2018). Referencing the pervasive sexualisation of children in mainstream media.

If you felt content with the explanation of the work through its physical elements, and the judgement you, yourself, as a reader and viewer derived from this, you might be an anti-intentionalist. If you felt that you could better appreciate the work after I offered the additional information, then you might be an intentionalist. Anti-intentionalism[4] consists of the viewer’s right to interpret work according to its internal factors and aesthetic qualities, rather than its external factors; creator’s background, psychology, and intentions. They are firm believers that the work is better appreciated when focused on its content rather than its author.

[4] Also known as isolationism.

Intentionalism[5] on the other hand, claims that the viewer's best interpretation is that which is backed up by internal evidence from the original interpretation of the artist themselves. In other words, the artist's interpretation determines what counts as the best possible interpretation of the artwork.

[5] Also known as contextualism or conventionalism. (Szu-Yen).

1.1 Anti-Intentionalism & The Intentional Fallacy

Towards the end of the lecture, Smithard disclosed a method of unravelling seemingly 'nonsensical' work by suggesting a shift from 'what does it mean?' to 'how can it be meaningful?'. She continued by asking "What can we as viewers or critics, bring to the work to make sense of it?" (Smithard, 2021). She called this process a shift from *meaning* to *interpretation*. This is the core principle of anti-intentionalism.

The anti-intentionalist movement was first born in 1946 with W.K Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's *Intentional Fallacy* and is considered to be the first theory of interpretation in analytic tradition.[6] (Szu-Yen). The movement was a direct reaction against 'biographical criticism' and the exaltation of the author, that held the artist's biographical information as the key to artistic interpretation, above the observation of the artwork itself.[7] *The Intentional Fallacy* discussed how the designs and intentions of the creator are not valid standards for judging the success of an artwork. If the work fails to convey its intentions, reference to external information about the author's planned meanings is equally misleading- consequently, it is useless. Anti-intentionalism believes that art should stand by itself, while the act of reaching for external information is what Wimsatt and Beardsley called the 'intentional fallacy'[8], in other words, the failure of the work. Whereas, when the artistic intentions are clearly conveyed through the work, it is superfluous to look into external evidence. Due to this, the anti-intentionalist position was framed as an objective counterargument against the more subjective intentionalist position, as the anti-intentionalist interpretation is based on the objective analysis of aesthetic elements of the artwork, described as "evidence from direct inspection of the object(s)" (Nathan, 2006), rather than the life of the artist.

One of the main problems with the anti-intentionalist position is that in its multiplicity of meaning it offers no guidance to pick between interpretations. But should it? Towards the end of the 20th century, anti-intentionalism lost popularity, but the value maximising theory deriving from the movement remained relevant. (Szu-Yen). This theory- also developed by Wimsatt and Beardsley- claimed that any interpretation that reveals or enhances the possible understanding of artwork increases its appreciation and is therefore a valid interpretation.

If this is the case, why doesn't anti-intentionalism consider the artist as a solid standard of judgement? This is partially due to the lack of accessible information regarding artistic intentions, or the availability of the artist themselves.

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[6] Beardsley extended his anti-intentionalist stance in his book *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* 1958.

[7] In *Intention Interpretation* Megan Warton claims that Wimsatt and Beardsley support their thesis by attempting to destroy their antagonist, and therefore don't have any formal argument of their own. (Megan, 2011).

[8] *The Intentional Fallacy* created a new legacy of literary and artistic criticism that lasted into the 1960s, called New Criticism.

Many artists are either unable or unwilling to discuss their practice, others might have passed away leaving behind no explicit information regarding their work and some may have even opted for anonymity.[9] While others may have forgotten their initial intentions or assigned new meanings to their work that do not reflect their original intentions, responding and adapting the art to new circumstances. As an artist, intention, divine inspiration or spurs of creativity do not progress in a straight line; the process is often erratic. There are artists who pre-plan their intentions for their work to the most minute of details, and still these may not be successfully realised, conveyed or understood. Then there are those who try to theorise their own decision after the work is finished, to help them make sense of it. Hence, it is only natural for the public to come up with their own interpretations through nothing but the work itself. Another, perhaps less discussed motive for the disregard of the author figure is that artists themselves may not be the best prepared to judge their own work, as they are so focused on the successful expression of their intentions, that they cannot see what they have actually created. This is a thought shared and beautifully illustrated by Oscar Wilde who explains how artists' self-awareness may blind them.

"The appeal of all art is simply to the artistic temperament. Art does not address herself to the specialist. Her claim is that she is universal, and that in all her manifestations she is one. Indeed, so far from it being true that the artist is the best judge of art, a really great artist can never judge other people's work at all, and can hardly, in fact, judge his own. That very concentration of vision that makes a man an artist, limits by its sheer intensity his faculty of fine appreciation. The energy of creation hurries him blindly on to his own goal. The wheels of his chariot raise the dust as a cloud around him. The gods are hidden from each other. They can recognise their worshippers. That is all." (Wilde, 2008, p.44).

Another motive for the anti-intentionalist support of the agency of art is visual economy; the way in which images are given different meanings and have different effects as they move through different places[10] (Rose, 2016, p.8) and 'object biography'; the accumulation of meanings that an object may acquire as it travels through time and space. (Wharton, 2015). Beardsley and Wimsatt touch on the impact of 'unplanned' external influences, and how these grant the audience more power of interpretation. "Oil paintings grow dark, frescoes fade, statues lose noses...The Madonna of Cimabue is still in the church of Santa Maria Novella; but does she speak to the visitors of to-day as to Florentines of the thirteenth century?" (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946, p.472). The shift in perception through both socio-cultural differences and physical changes causes the elements of the work to morph into something that would not reflect the artist's initial intentions or wishes today. The laws of 'object biography' pushes for the discardment of unreliable artistic intentions and urges the viewer to consider visual material within new contexts.

Their belief is one shared by French literary critic Roland Barthes. His essay, *The Death of The Author*, adamantly criticises the idea of judging work through the analysis of the author and their intentions.

[9] For example, Dadaism is known to have worked under false names, taking advantage of anonymity in the concealment of age, gender, ethnicity etc.
[10] Exchanges both commodified and not.

He believes that "when the author has been found the text is explained" (Barthes & Heath, 1997, p.7) preferring, like anti-intentionalists, or perhaps to an even greater extent, the complete absence of the creator. Barthes' believes that ultimately a text is only born when it comes into contact with the reader. This is not to say that a text or an artwork does not exist outside of its relationship with its creator but that the meaning of the work does not solely rely on the intent of its author and the figure of the author itself, but the reader, the viewer and the audience who bring their own subjectivities to the work.

In their essay, Beardsley and Wimsatt reiterate this tacit truth by stating that the evaluation of artwork is a public act, and the work is ultimately always measured against something outside the author. (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946, p.9). The unsuitability of intentionalism as a method of interpretation is emphasised by the paradox of intention, stating that artworks are usually made with the assumption that they will be viewed and appreciated beyond the interaction with the artist themselves, therefore the work is expected to be self-sufficient so to say, without any external aid at the site of audiencing.

Many artists accept that the interpretation of their work can and most likely will differ from their original intentions- some may even desire such elusive understandings. Many agree that it is only through this interaction with the outside world that art gains value, comes to life or is ‘activated’. In Pinney’s words “The significance of an object does not pre-exist its social life. Any object is always actualised in a specific moment of use, which produces both the object and the sort of person looking at it.” (Pinney, 2004). The effects of art depend on this contact with a figure other than its creator. However, the artwork is not just an object onto which meaning is projected. The artwork is shaped by the viewer and the viewer is also shaped by the artwork. So Pinney’s words not only mirror Barthes' views but argue in favour of a multiplicity of artistic interpretation and acknowledges the power of visual material in its potentiality for various meanings.

For a moment let's adopt the ideology of anti-intentionalism and grant full power of opinion to the artwork and the viewer. If meaning is determined by the viewers for the viewers, is there a specific audience that is better equipped with the knowledge to interpret art? For example, critics or curators? “If you think that the decisive normative constraint on artworks is that they be able to be appreciated, then…If there is such a thing as the best available interpretation of an artwork, it will be the one that makes it most enjoyable for the best qualified audience for it.” (Dickie, G., & Wilson, W. K. 1995, p.427). The perfect viewer is able to take such an anti-intentionalist approach to interpretation because they already come equipped with external knowledge about the work. This can range from an understanding of technique and media, education in art history, information about the artist or other such particulars. Beardsley even admits that the analysis of artwork may require some external information- not of the biography or intentions of the artist, but the “general style of the work, or of other works to which it [the artwork in hand] alludes, or of the works with which it sharply contrasts.”[11] (Nathan, 2006).

According to the standards of the perfect viewer, the best qualified audience would be one that masquerades as an anti-intentionalist with the resources and knowledge of intentionalists.

[11] This, unfortunately, slightly weakens the anti-intentionalist argument.

According to a study carried out by sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Alan Darbel, this intentionalist knowledge is usually imparted or available to the 'educated middle classes'.[12] However, they firmly state that just because you are outside this group doesn't mean that you are unable to appreciate artwork but rather "works of art only exist for those who have the means of appropriating them, that is, of deciphering them." (Bourdieu et al., 1991), and without the proper education, much of what is called art in contemporary visual culture may elude us.[13] The main problem with this point of view is the assumption that those who inherently enjoy and appreciate art are those who thoroughly understand it and vice versa. If this was true, couldn't one assume that searching for external knowledge is an attempt to reach a deeper understanding and achieve the same appreciation and enjoyment? This is the basis of our next topic, intentionalism.

[12] The perfect viewer is usually represented by the W.E.I.R.D population; Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich and Democratic. (Haidt, 2013).
[13] Therefore, Darbell and Bordieu argue that art galleries exclude certain groups of people.

1.2 Intentionalism & The Expressive Fallacy

Imagine that you are walking along the beach and notice what seems to be the words of a poem traced on the sand of the shore. Intentionalist argue that what gives real value and meaning to these words is the idea of them having been created by an entity with a purpose, rather than accidentally being formed by the waves of the sea. Foucault retorts “What is necessary to its composition, if a work is not something written by a person called an ‘author’?” (Foucault, 2010, p.118). If we were to consider the poem a product of the sea's natural mechanical processes, Knapp and Michaels believe that these ‘accidents’ will not be counted as words, but rather marks that resemble language. Intentionalism believes that it is only the existence of a conscious force that even allows us to understand a work of art. (Knapp & Michaels,1982).

This very simple metaphor illustrates the basic premise of intentionalism. In *Against Theory*, Knapp and Michaels advocate against the separation of (authorial) intention from (object) meaning, arguing that you cannot have one without the other, making them essentially synonymous. They believe that an authorless work is intentionless and if they are intentionless they are therefore meaningless.

One of the biggest weaknesses of anti-intentionalism is the unlikelihood of convention determining a single true meaning. (Hirsch, 1967). Often the work itself does not provide sufficient proof for this, so intentionalist theories solve this plurality of meaning by granting power to the artist and their artistic intention.[14] Intentionalism can be arranged into three distinctive subgroups: absolute intentionalism, in which meaning is established by the artistic intention, extreme intentionalism in which meaning is held within the borders of convention, and moderate intentionalism, when artistic intentions don’t seem to match the meaning (the artist failed to convey the work’s initial purpose), so the meaning is decided by convention and context.

But why should having ‘one true meaning’ even matter? Consider a road sign that has more than one active meaning. This completely eradicates the sign’s functionality, leading to misinterpretation and consequently, the misuse of the sign. It is only because *we assign meaning* to the road sign that the meaning is successfully conveyed.[15] In *Validity in Interpretation,* Hirsch’s principles of intentionalism bolster this example by stating, “If the work has more than one meaning, then it does not really have a meaning” (Hirsch, 1976). The only way to have one meaning is to give the deciding vote to the artist.

[14] Beardsley fought this argument by insisting that in most cases, an analysis of the extent of the coherence of the work can lead to the correct interpretation- but only through the image itself. (Szu-Yen)

[15] But as we will explore later, analogies that compare aesthetic perception to everyday experiences fall short, by not reflecting the special aesthetic perception that occurs when we engage with artwork.

Therefore, according to Hirsch, any interpretation that does not acknowledge the artist's intentions as the true meaning is considered invalid. Ismonger's interpretation of Hirsch's first principle attempts to save his argument by claiming that in the case of multiple plausible meanings the one that meshes with the artist's intention is the correct one. Thus, feeding the intentionalist theory.

Another way of viewing intentionalism is through the eyes of British philosopher Richard Wollheim. In *Art and its Objects*, Wollheim offers the reader an example in which he proposes the idea of two identical artworks. One is an original painting by Rembrandt, while the other painting is made by one of his students; the two works are physically indistinguishable.

Wollheim claims that once the viewer arrives at the realisation (or is told) which painting is an original Rembrandt, they will undoubtedly view it differently, due to the simple fact that they have suddenly acquired more context and will associate any personal knowledge of the famous painter with (and over) their knowledge of the piece of art. (Wollheim, 1968, p.185). This in turn can be referred to as 'the expressive fallacy'.

While the omnipresence of the artist may often hinder our creative and critical evaluation of visual material, a lack of knowledge of historical and contemporary works may lead to contextualisation and/or appropriation issues. Having information regarding the artwork's background, technique, maker, origins, and visual economy may help to situate an art object in its appropriate socio-cultural context; a time and place which may provide unique insight into the intentions of the creator, especially when these are not provided in any clear format by the artist themselves. Intentionalists assume that this external information must be a source of inspiration to the artist. An assumption that many of us accept as a reality, and one that is endorsed by art institutions as seen in their exhibition displays.[16]

Nonetheless, intentionalism (as anti-intentionalism) has its inevitable flaws. When people search for a deeper understanding of art they can fall into a sort of interpretative 'confirmation bias.' The intentionalist quest for knowledge does not necessarily progress towards a better grasp of meaning but a firmer notion of our own convictions. (Knapp & Michaels,1982). Seeking knowledge that validates our preconceived ideas about work, while disregarding any external information that we might find dissatisfying - as happens now and then when looking too deeply into the context of artists and their lives rather than the content of their work. It is important to bear in mind that intentionalists also contend that when appraising or evaluating the so-called success of an artwork one must take into account the artist's intention even when unsuccessfully conveyed, as it helps in the evaluation of the piece. This is a big difference to anti-intentionalists who, as previously mentioned, would view this as a clear sign of the work's failure.

[16] More on this in the following chapters.

1.3 Moderate Positions

In *Challenging Partial Intentionalism*, Hans Maes debates over the pros and cons of 'moderate actual intentionalism'; the most accepted mode of interpretation up to date, developed and re-baptised by philosopher Paisley Livingston as 'partial intentionalism', an intermediary position arguing for the relevance and significance of intentions only *when* and *if* successfully realised. Success of the artwork is therefore contingent on the successful delivery of the artist's intentions, but this, as we know, can be quite complicated.[17] (Maes, 2008).

Maes mentions "If one finds out the meaning of a word by looking it up in a dictionary, one is not interpreting. Similarly, one could say that, if one finds out the meaning of…a work of art by reading a catalogue or anthology, one is not interpreting either." (Maes, 2008). Actual intentionalism embodies this method of interpretation as it supports the artistic intentions as offered by the artist, who represents the 'dictionary figure' in Maes' analogy. On the other hand, anti-intentionalists would see this as the failure of the work, and Maes seems to substantiate this. He compares this form of interpretation to the analogy of 'understanding a joke'. "If we don't 'get' a joke, someone may explain it to us, but the explanation will rarely result in spontaneous laughter. Explaining a joke not only puts an end to interpretation, but also, characteristically, puts a damper on the effect of the joke." (Maes, 2008). The example refers back to the idea of the perfect viewer; if the joke fails it may not be that the joke in itself is bad, but that the audience is not appropriately informed to understand it. This is the crux of interpretational theory and analytical aesthetics, the lack of an informed listener, or/and the bad comedian may create the oversaturation of information so that the audience may get the 'punchline' but not laugh. However, it is this so-called 'perfect viewer' that represents the target audience of modern galleries and established artistic institutions. According to Bennett "the knowledge that produces the 'good eye' is kept invisible in order to maintain the gallery as a space where the middle class can distinguish itself from other social groups by displaying apparently innate 'taste'". (Rose 2016, p.266). The metaphor of the elusive joke may quickly turn into the mean girls ostracising others with their own inside jokes.

Hypothetical intentionalism displays a similar problem with the ideal audience or perfect viewer and awkwardly sits between anti-intentionalism and intentionalism. As the name suggests, this position states that the best hypothesis is the best interpretation. This interpretation is carried out by an informed audience, who have some knowledge of artistic intentions. However, there are many problems with this approach as the hypothesis may not necessarily constitute the 'truth', and the intended audience is a variation of the perfect viewer, targeted by the artist, giving rise to exclusion, due to private knowledge.

[17] Moderate intentionalism is often challenged by hypothetical intentionalism. (Maes, 2008).

In order to solve this issue, supporters of hypothetical intentionalism replace the intended audience with an appropriate/ideal one. This audience interprets artwork through the use of 'public evidence' so as to not segregate viewers and create unjust advantages.

In the case of many valid hypotheses, the one that makes the artwork aesthetically/ artistically better is given precedence over the others. This not only becomes a problem of identifying what this superior aesthetic may be, but also assumes that this is what the artist intended and desired for the work. "That…criterion for determining the best hypothesis is inseparable from the aesthetic criterion." (Szu-Yen). While this alludes to anti-intentionalism by giving power to the artwork's agency, this approach does so by creating an aesthetic measure, a way of evaluating 'good' vs 'bad' aesthetics, instead of enmeshment between the work and the provided public evidence.

Furthermore, what can be categorised as 'public evidence'? Does this also include private/personal knowledge made public? Does it only consider curatorial guidance, such as exhibition texts or catalogues? Hypothetical intentionalism attempts to solve this by stating that public evidence is determined by what the artist wants to be known. All in all, hypothetical intentionalism has too many unknown or uncontrollable variables in order for it to be applied efficiently in a curatorial setting.

Finally, something I wish to bring forth as a personal addition to these moderate positions is the idea of 'collective moderate intentionalism'.[18] This position follows the same rules as the aforementioned moderate or partial intentionalism, but acknowledges the multiple agencies in charge of production, dissemination and contextualisation of meaning within contemporary visual culture. In his book *Art Worlds*, Howard Becker describes how any and all creative processes are dependent upon social networks of supply manufacturers, collectors, dealers, curators, conservators etc. Arguing that artistic practice is in its core a group effort; a collective craft that cannot be steered or realised by individual intent. (Becker, 1982). This will be expanded upon in Chapter 3, when discussing the different agencies in charge of the varied curatorial arrangements and practices; from the interior design of the exhibition space to the layout and hanging of artwork, each with their individual effect on the meaning of visual material. However, it must be noted that this approach doesn't necessarily urge the viewer to consider the absolute validity of the meaning(s) of every agency, but to consider their unique effects on the production of meaning and the way they can steer intention and viewer interpretation; whether this be at the site of production, (material/tool manufacturers, target audience and intentions) the site of the image itself (materiality, composition, media) the site of audiencing (curation, anchorage, viewing positions, location) or the site of circulation (collectors, promotions, social media, visual economy etc.). (see Appendix A).

Even curators are affected by this collective approach, as many work with "a limited idea of the artist as the sole source of meaning production will surely be affected by this, as the artist is their only arbiter of shifting global conditions." (Gupta, 2008, p.63) Maybe the idea of art and artists being the medium for the curator is reductionist.

[18] Not to be confused with collaborative art with collective intentions.

Maybe the answer to the question “how do you figure out how to take responsibility for the ideas you [curator] set forth?” (Gupta, 2008, p.62) is the acknowledgement of a collective voice. An unspoken and partially unplanned collaboration, that forms intention. (Gupta, 2008, p.65).

Furthermore, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, when authorship ceased to be contingent upon originality, multiple intentionalities, temporalities, and agencies began to be considered (but only when these mesh with the work). In truth, no matter what the artist's private intentions or the viewer’s personal interpretations may be, these have all been silently affected by a list of agencies that shift the realisation of intentions and their successful deliverance to the audience.

Figure 2: Drawing made by Hans Maes' niece, Nina.

One assumes that the system would be more accommodating to abstract, unfinished or relational work, as it allows for a broader scope of interpretations that also lends itself to more diverse curatorial or artistic projects. However, proof of the opposite is true. Figure 2 (see image above) shows a drawing done by a little girl. If she told the viewer that this was a drawing of a dog, one would enmesh the elements of the picture to match this interpretation quite automatically. Similarly, if she said the drawing was of something that was harder to connect with the picture's physical elements, one would still be inclined to trust the artist's words. As Maes, to whom I owe this example puts it, we seem to comply more with the authority of the artists and their intentions when evidence of intentions/meaning is reduced or indeterminate "because almost any explanation would mesh sufficiently with the totality of evidence"[19] (Maes, 2008, p.87-88). Hirsch states that the act of uncovering such meaning involves 'the addition of information'. But according to Knapp and Michaels, Hirsch erroneously thinks that this addition of information is the addition of intention. "Since intention is already present, the only thing added, in the movement from indeterminacy to determinacy, is information about the intention, not the intention itself." (Knapp & Michaels,1982, p.4).

As will be discussed in further detail in the following chapters, current contemporary artistic and curatorial practices work towards an intentionalist approach in their displays, and this has become the norm in most exhibition settings regardless of cultural, thematic or social variations. This was not always the case, as the adulation of the 'author figure' such as we observe today can be partially explained by a shift in discourse during the Renaissance period in Europe, a development in definition and status of the arts as a mere craft or technical skill to a new understanding of 'creator', 'author' and even 'genius'. In addition, with the incorporation of the new copyright laws, authorship not only gained social and cultural prestige but also authenticity, a chance to build their reputation and profit from their practice thanks to the legal ownership of their work. (Foucault, 2010). However, when used wrong, intentionalism may bolster privileged visibilities and create limitations within both artistic practice and exhibition making.

[19] This however puts an end to the active process of interpreting. More on this in Chapter 4.

1.4 Meaning, Intention & Interpretation

For decades literary theorists have debated over the ambiguous borders between meaning, intention and interpretation. Without delving too deep into the philosophical, epistemological and ontological aspects of defining these terms, one can grasp their basic understanding. We know that intention has to do with intent, a believed or plausible aim/desire/propensity to act out. It sits on an amorphous line between action and a state of mind. A quick look at the Merriam Webster dictionary will tell us that 'meaning' is defined as 'the thing one *intends* to convey (especially by language).' So, intention and meaning seem to be inextricably connected. While, according to the Oxford dictionary, interpretation is defined as the *explanation of meaning.* With this in mind, it is easy to see why intentionalists have adopted an interpretative approach that aims to discover as much information about the author's intentions, as they equate meaning to artistic intentions. However, the secondary definition of 'meaning' according to the Merriam Webster dictionary defines it as 'the thing that *is* conveyed (especially by language)'. It asserts that meaning is already embedded within [visual] language itself, a belief advocated by anti-intentionalists.

As I have shown in this first chapter, each of these terms and their supporting arguments can be broken down and challenged to a certain extent. In the search for the most truthful and objective understanding or perhaps the most enjoyable experience of art, we are confronted by the relativism of meaning, the subjectivity of interpretation and the struggle of desired vs realised intentions amongst other social and cultural modalities.

For Hirsch meaning is what the author intends to convey through their work, whereas the significance of this meaning is based on something outside the work itself such as the viewer and their own interpretations or wider context. Thus, arguing that meaning or intentions don't change, only their individual importance in relation to different agents. The definitions and importance of 'meaning', 'intention' and 'interpretation' will change according to what system of interpretation one uses. This creates a major distinction between audience interpretation vs intended meaning, while acknowledging both.

If we were to begin defining these terms from an intentionalist point of view, intention (and its understanding) should be considered as the starting point. While being great motivators and indicators of action, intentions can be very unreliable. They are not all conscious or derivative of a single source, and as previously mentioned, intentions are not always realised. Artists can have intentions that guide their creative process which they ultimately might abandon or change along the way. Should these inclines be considered by both audiences and curators as constitutive to the body of work?

In a lecture titled the *Creative Act,* Duchamp lays out the limitations between artistic intentions and their realisation. “The artist goes from intention to realisation through a chain of totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward the realisation is a series of efforts, pains, satisfactions, refusals, decisions, which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious…The result of this struggle is a difference between the intention and its realisation, a difference that the artist is not aware of. Consequently, in the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap which represents the inability of the artist to express fully his intention; this difference between what he intended to realise and did realise, is the personal “art coefficient” contained in the work.” (Duchamp, 1957, p.139). Within this frame of reference, intentions cannot be fully trusted, not through the knowledge of intentions from the artists themselves nor the manifestation and realisation of these intentions in the physical work itself. Nonetheless, when it comes to anti-intentionalist and intentionalist theories “neither can really escape intention.” (Wharton, 2015).

For anti-intentionalists, the existence of artistic intention is acknowledged but its value in determining the meaning of artwork is deemed unreliable and thus discounted. Anti-intentionalists jump directly from (object) meaning to (viewer) interpretation, making the aesthetic and physical components of the site of the image itself the starting point. While their attempt at an objective approach to interpretation can be appreciated, having the work itself as a starting point raises many challenges of its own. Many aesthetic or physical components of visual material are also contingent on context and external knowledge. The meaning of these components is tied to representations, and because representations can never be fixed neither can meaning be fixed in its entirety. (Hall, 2005, p.20). This meaning is further impacted by technological modalities at the site of audiencing (explored in the following chapters), as well as the obvious social and cultural variations that affect intentionalism and anti-intentionalism alike. Consequently, meaning based on ‘object meaning’ will produce a myriad of different interpretations.[20]

So, what if we were to eradicate intention completely? Juhls considers the idea of language without intention and concludes that intention must be added to ‘make it work’. But is ‘intentionless’ really akin to ‘meaningless’? I don't think so. Art as a form of visual language can still be interpreted despite being created without conscious or clear intentions, much like the seashore poem metaphor by Knapp and Michaels[21], but it can only be understood in conjunction with discourse. Hall bolsters this in claiming that “nothing meaningful exists outside of discourse.” not suggesting that “nothing exists outside of discourse”, but that when it comes to meaning, we require frameworks of understanding to make sense of it. (Hall, 2005). In the following chapter we will be looking at how art institutions navigate within this discourse, handle artistic intentions and how our frameworks of understanding and interpretation are shaped by the curator, as a producer of meaning.

[20] This however does not mean that there will not be a ‘popular’ interpretation based on the site of the image itself.

[21] Knapp and Michaels claim that there is no such thing as intentionless meaning, artistic intention is equivalent to meaning. (Megan, 2011).

Chapter 2

✶

The Site of Audiencing

During my first year as a master's student at Aalto University I signed up for a course called 'Curation from Theory to Practice'. The course promised real and professional experience in curation by having the student in charge of all creative, technical and promotional processes of exhibition making. From finding sponsors, organising open calls and artist applications, to budgeting, website design and writing exhibition statements. To my dismay, artists and designers could not be recruited from within the course. As an artist myself, not being able to offer up my own vision, design the website or even a poster, I desperately sought out the most creative task the curatorial team had to offer. I signed up for the committee that would develop the general conceptual framework of the exhibition. This included the theme, text and title, as well as the overall curation of the space. My understanding of the job of a curator changed drastically throughout the course of the 3-month project. I learned about the repercussions of technical limitations on the display and perception of artwork, the push and pull between the artist and curator as well as the fine balance between creative freedom and actual functionality. The work was selected in accordance with our exhibition theme, so the artworks felt like pieces of a much larger project. Despite not being one of the exhibited artists, I felt that I had achieved an enmeshment of idea, image and text. The exhibition felt like one large curatorial artwork and opened my eyes to the variety of responsibilities that lay hidden under the title of curator.

Contemporary curators are known to be the custodians of art spaces, in which they can be in charge of anything, from the selection of artworks to the organisation of their display and their arrangement. But these tasks have a much larger impact on the reception and meaning of artwork than one might imagine. Through the selection of art, curators not only play an active role in providing visibility and exposure, but also decide on the 'who', 'what' and 'how', through the contextualisation of the work. They may also oversee the distribution of fees, production funds, court sponsors, collectors and dealers, collaborate with the press and government bureaucrats, or promote the artists/art spaces via their social media presence. In other words, curators act as mediators between producers of art and the power structures within contemporary visual culture. Curatorial practices also play a huge role in the production of meaning; whether they simply influence the pre-existing meaning of the art object or have a more active role in creation and conveyance of this meaning is still up for question.

Curators contextualise artist's ideas, artists' works or both, depending on the approach that is taken according to the aforementioned theories of interpretation; intentionalism, anti-intentionalism and/or moderate intentionalism respectively. However, it must be noted that there exists an interdependence between the practice of the artists and the curators in the contemporary field of cultural production. While there are many artists who are also the curators of their own work (a practice that seems to further support the delivery of the artist's own artistic intentions and visions), in most cases these roles are separate. So, while artists may very well produce art without the help of curators, if no art is being made, curators of contemporary art are out of a job. Curatorial practice is dependent upon the existence of artistic production and artists are dependent upon curators for the exposure and potential dissemination of their work.

Chapter 2 will expand on the aforementioned rise of the author figure, in the form of both artist and curator, and their intersections, while delving into how these evolving roles have affected the hierarchical structure of visual culture. In this chapter we will also be looking at the site where visual material is encountered by the viewer; the exhibition, which I will sometimes be referring to as the site of audiencing. This term is best illustrated by American philosopher John Fiske, as the site in which a visual image has its meanings renegotiated, or even rejected, by particular audiences watching in specific circumstances. (Rose, 2016, p.38).

Often taken for granted, the spaces in which artwork is displayed can have as much or even more of an impact on the perception of the work than the site of the image itself. One must consider to what extent these artistic institutions and the authorities behind them control the visuality and thus power of images on display. My interests lie in the history of the origins of museums and galleries, the specific arrangement of these settings and their respective effects on viewer interpretation. It is not enough to study the 'self-determined, autonomous viewer' that intentionally 'consumes' exhibits. Nor is it appropriate to consider the viewer as a passive observer who simply allows exhibitions to 'transmit'. This is what we will try to tackle in the following chapter: the interpretational forces that are brought on by the audience in response to the interpretational effects conveyed through the site of audiencing.

2.1 Origins & Purpose of the Site of Audiencing

The educational value of art used to be much more present due to high levels of illiteracy amongst the population, especially in mediaeval times when paintings served a strict pedagogical (and moral) purpose. (Efland, 2017). Although this is no longer as prevalent, art remains a form of visually informing those who care to consciously or even subconsciously expose themselves to it. (Dillenberger, 2004). The catholic church, albeit an extreme and outdated comparison to modern galleries, provides substantial evidence of the impact power structures behind the site of audiencing can have on audience interpretation. The patronage of the church was always a significant source of income for artists, but only to those who were deemed worthy by the church. For example, El Greco's early biblical paintings were bound to the artistic ideals formulated by the Council of Trent[22] (1545-1563). Cardinal Carlo Borromeo[23] explained the guidelines as follows "Only such images as conform to scriptural truth, traditions, ecclesiastical histories, custom and usage...may be painted... Similarly whatever is profane, base or obscene, dishonest or provocative…or that which can offend the minds and eyes of the faithful, all this should be avoided." (Maré, 2009). In Western European Renaissance and Middle Ages, biblical paintings commissioned by the powerful aristocracy and religious institutions mirrored socio-normative values (and papal supremacy), leaving little to no room for deviations, creating a form of political doctrine or religious propaganda, with celebrated works like Michael Angelo's *Last Judgement* (Leader, 2014) or Raphael's frescoes in Stanza di Eliodoro amongst others. (de Jong, 2021).

Another institution with unexpected parallels to galleries are prisons. In fact, the design of museums is said to have evolved simultaneously with the design of Western correctional institutions and penitentiary systems both structurally and systematically during the 18th and 19th century. (Rose, 2016, p.251). In *Discipline and Punishment,* Foucault discusses the design of a new penal system working through mutual vigilance. As the ideal setting, Foucault employs Jeremy Bentham's design of the panopticon, developed in the 18th century (see Appendix B). Due to the arrangement of the cells in relation to the watchtower, prisoners felt constantly surveilled. This was an institutional apparatus that controlled its inmates with the idea of constant observation. A similar system of collective and mutual surveillance was employed in the design of museum architecture in its endeavour to control the possible 'unruly crowds' of viewers.

[22] The Council of Trent was a direct response to the rising Protestant reformation, and a call for the Roman Catholic church to reframe their doctrine and solidify their teachings and practices.
[23] One of its original drafters.

Instructions from a 1901 ‘Short Sermon to Sightseers’ at the Pan-American Exposition even urged the audience to "please remember when you get inside the gates you are part of the show.” (Bennett, 2005 p.64). These spaces created a new self-regulating public. “While everyone could see, there were also vantage points from which everyone could be seen, thus combining the functions of spectacle and surveillance.” (Bennett, 2005, p.62). The comparison of museums to institutions of confinement challenged the previous modes of exhibitions that had formerly wandered the streets of Europe or been reserved for the benefit of the aristocracy. Now, they were shifting from private settings into public environments, working as new vehicles for the broadcast of power. However, it's important to note that exhibitions did not just work toward the display of power as a form of direct subordination. Instead, it held power through the proliferation of culture that aimed to be shared and thus collectively regulate behaviour[24] and morals.[25] “To identify with power, to see it as, if not directly theirs, then indirectly so, a force regulated and channelled by society’s ruling groups but for the good of all: this was the rhetoric of power embodied in the exhibitionary complex —a power made manifest not in its ability to inflict pain but by its ability to organise and coordinate an order of things and to produce a place for the people in relation to that order.” (Bennett, 2005, p.63). The aim was to make power visible to the audience while simultaneously representing that power as their own.

Furthermore, in *The Birth of the Museum*, Bennett states that public museums and galleries were justified by 19th century commentators as “antidotes to working-class men’s drunkenness… an alternative to working-class disaffection and riot, and as a means to civilise manners and morals.” (Bennett, 2005). Bennet claims that not much has changed, as institutions continue to harness ‘culture’ as a tool of social management, to produce a set of values and manners of social relations in their viewers, with the use of their unique language. As such, exhibitions work as modern ritual settings, upholding many different identities; artistic, national, subcultural, 'international', gender-or-race-specific, avant-garde, regional, global etc. (Neill, 2007, p.4). It seems as if historically, artistic institutions have charged themselves with the task of uplifting societal moral standards by culturally/politically and socially elevating and educating the audience.

A significant turning point in the educational journey of exhibition spaces resulted from a shift in the display of images of processes and tools of production to the exhibition of finished products. This was also influenced by the differences in admission times and ticket prices. For example, the late hours and cheap tickets of the Mechanic Institute exhibitions were targeted at the working-class citizens, offering more accessibility. On the other hand, the first Great Exhibition held at the Crystal Palace in 1851, while open to all, caused the stratification of its public by providing different days for different classes of visitors, regulated by varying prices of admission. (Bennett, 2005).

[24] Further highlighting the comparison with correctional institutions.
[25] Whether the power exerted (especially) by established institutions is still perceived in such a good light nowadays is up for question.

Through a network of relations, the ideological reach of exhibition extended beyond its walls, as it assimilated ‘popular entertainment zones’ and developed urban and contemporary culture, often located in the centre of capital cities, like the Louvre in Paris, The British Museums in London, El Museo del Prado in Madrid or the Altes Museum, later known as Museumsinsel in Berlin. These sites of audiencing have evolved from private and elite temples of the arts to instruments of education and social discipline to also become touristic magnets, epicentres of culture and art as well as symbols of wealth and power. (Planeix-Crocker, 2016).

While public museums offered ideological solidity and permanence that best represented the state’s wishes, exhibitions provided flexibility in their temporary and changing shows. “They made the order of things dynamic, mobilising it strategically in relation to the more immediate ideological and political exigencies of the particular moment.” (Bennett, 2005, p.73). With this in mind, when looking at contemporary sites of audiencing, one must also look at what and who they promote, in other words what is the dominant Scopic regime that runs through these institutions.

Scopic regime refers to a system of visual order that determines “how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein” (Rose, 2016, p.25). This Scopic regime is partially defined by the design of the exhibition itself and its curatorial arrangements. And because the origins of museums have had their start as institutions of power, education and culture, this need to inform and control audiences’ reception and interpretations has carried on to modern day exhibition making.

How the artwork is framed and displayed or whether there is an accompanying text, all have their effects on how the work is interpreted. Images never exist in complete isolation but are always understood in relation to how they are contextualised within specific spaces. That is why in order to understand interpretation one must understand the places in which interpretation takes place, and how they have been shaped through their history, purpose and especially their new custodians, the curators.

2.2 The Author, The Artist and The Curator

The Story of Art opens boldly by stating “There really is no such thing as art. There are only artists.” (Gombrich, 2021). This does not mean to suggest that work created by those who do not call themselves artists cannot be art. But rather that art is often judged as an extension of its creator, and thus reduced to be understood only in relation to the artist. Although the new formalist aesthetic of post structuralism, with supporters like Barthes and Foucault, would like us to eradicate the artist from the art, due to the ambiguous and continuously changing nature of the contemporary art scene, defining art as that which is produced by the artist seems like the safest and easiest approach. (Battersby, 1989 p.22). However, in a world in which everyone can proclaim themselves an artist, work can be produced in a collaborative and curatorial manner and artwork thrives in popular anonymity, can one really depend on the artist?

The figure of the author has gone through an evolution; from the mediaeval craftsman, and the renaissance ‘imitator’ of God like beauty, to the original creator and the contemporary genius. The author of the renaissance and neoclassical period was considered a vessel of God given knowledge. This in turn meant the work was up for public use. Simultaneously, originality was attributed to divine inspiration, ascertaining the holiness of the author.[26] In both cases the author had no true agency or originality but was simply transforming what already existed- whether this be divine inspiration or raw materials- into a new product. This all changed by the 18th century when Edward Young defined an author as the owner of their work, and this ownership was only gained through originality, thus fuelling the modern notion of artistic genius.[27] (Woodmansee, 1984).

In her book *Genius and Copyright* Martha Woodmansee talks about intellect and proof of intentions as a basis for artistic ownership; “To ground the author's claim to ownership of his work… it would first be necessary to show that this work transcends its physical foundation. It would be necessary to show that it is an emanation of his intellect--an *intentional*, as opposed to a merely physical object.” (Woodmansee, 1984, p.16). This conscious intentionality is what characterises both intentionalism and the most prevalent and ubiquitous understanding of the author figure. Although nowadays it does not necessarily mirror contemporary definitions of the original ‘creator’ in its various forms, it certainly helps in defining what we consider art and who we consider artists. However, Barthes challenges Young’s definition by invalidating the author's originality arguing that texts are simply made up of "multiple writings drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue" (Barthes, & Heath, 1997).

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[26] “Modern criticism, in its desire to ‘recover’ the author from a work, employs devices strongly reminiscent of Christian exegesis when it wished to prove the value of a text by ascertaining the holiness of its author.” (Foucault, 2010).

[27] Expanded upon on his essay *Conjectures on Original Composition* 1759.

This is also seen in the ‘intertextuality’ of visual material, referring to the way in which the meanings of images or texts are dependent upon the meanings carried by other images and texts as well. (Rose, 2016, p.201). This brings back the whole concept of the artist as genius due to God given and divine originality, but once the author is stripped of their claim to originality, their divinity and authority over the independent creation of their work is nullified. If there is no such thing as an original work, there is no *one* author, and therefore looking for meaning in the author is futile.

According to Barthes' argument, authors, images and even viewers are connected across varying cultures and temporalities. It is a statement that rings true, even more so in our culture of ‘appropriation', amid the prevalence of terms like ‘credits’ and ‘acknowledgements’ referencing various people, groups, ideas, histories and narratives. It is perhaps a problem of linguistics, an opportunity for us to re-define the ‘original' and acknowledge the limitations of our current understanding and naive pursuit of it.

With this in mind, artistic interpretation depends greatly on how one defines artists and artistic identity, and how this in turn defines artwork.[28] So what happens when the curator is suddenly called an artist?

[28] It is important to note that our understanding of the ‘artist’ and ‘art’ are both extremely Eurocentric as well as anthropocentric.

2.3 Curation, Artistic Practice & Production of Meaning

The verb ‘to curate’ was only just created in the second half of the 19th century, deriving from the Latin to take care of. (See Oxford English Dictionary). In French, the archaic term ‘maitre d’exposition’ literally translates to ‘master of exposition' or ‘exhibition master’ reflecting gender normative constraints and a sense of ownership of the exhibition. In Spanish, the term ‘conservacion’ or conservation alludes to the incipient purpose of curators as custodians of art collections and technical experts. Both words describe the same term but have very different connotations. The fusion of these translations depicts the rise of the evolved and multifaceted contemporary curator of the 21st century. Today curatorial practices go beyond the selection of work and arrangement of displays to the active production of catalogues, curatorial texts and promotional activities that influence the visibility, reception and interpretation of the artworks on display.

The evolution of curation can be seen in the increase of large scale and avant garde curatorial projects such as international ‘Biennials’ or the new ‘Documenta.’ But even smaller exhibitions have completely redesigned their approach to curation. Consider an early example in the organisation of *Bonnard at the Orangerie* in 1966. In this case, the job of the curator included the selection of the works and contacting the collectors to obtain the loans and hang the work. The staff had to make do with a typewriter and a bulletin board, and the curator was content with a curation that combined chronology with aesthetics, with a slim black-and-white catalogue and a standard foreword by an anonymous official. The same curator worked with the same artist, twenty years later at the Centre Pompidou, at which point “the catalogue had grown into an immense monograph (inaccessible to a private publisher), evidence of a deepening scientific determination to demonstrate a specific objective.” This time around the curator had employed a much larger staff in order to carry out the physical installation of the works which attracted far more attention than the first exhibition, with a focus on sensitising a- not very informed- public to the inner meanings of the work. (Heinich & Pollak, 2005, p.169). This change in the framing of curatorial projects may be tied to economic interests that can both limit/ elevate curatorial and artistic choices; influenced by the growing reputation of the artist- but more so of the curator themselves. The question of authority (as well as authorship) is once again brought up, in the way artistic intentions and agency can often get lost amid heightened curatorial power and framing. In an interview, curator Nato Thompson argued “I am not interested in these annoying artist-vs.-curator debates unless they are about inequalities in pay, social capital and equity. But as to the point of what we do, I think these dichotomies are nestled in an antiquated discursive field of ‘art’ that cannot keep pace with an emerging neoliberal paradigm of social production. We are all artists and curators.
The point is where we operate in the matrix of cultural production and how we use the tools we have toward social change.” (Gupta, 2008, p.61).

While I agree with the notion that both artists and curators operate in the production of meaning, they do so on different levels and in different ways. When it comes to the design of exhibitions, artists lay the foundation of meaning, whereas curators externalise and contextualise these ideas within new frameworks. Perhaps the question of authorship and agency in reference to these 'annoying debates' about artists vs curators has a large impact on the inequalities that concern Thompson, which is why they are important to discuss in the first place. These inequalities or injustices arise from the definition of these roles. Working towards a better understanding of the author, both in terms of artist and curator could help unravel bigger questions within artistic discourse. Tackling artistic notions of appropriation, censorship, originality, and value. So what instigated this polemical elevation of curator as artist?

During the 1960s, the discourse around artworks went from Chapter 1, the site of the image itself, to Chapter 2, the site of audiencing; from the critique of artwork to a form of curatorial criticism. Paul O'Neill explains that this was unlike that of traditional Western art criticism. The discourse and subject no longer revolved around the object of art or its creator but went beyond to include the new art of curation and the role played by curators themselves. (Neill, 2007, p.2). Perhaps this was pushed by the change in perception of the curator as a passive carer to an active participant in the creation of meaning and an essential figure within artistic discourse. Paul O'Neill explains how curation has now been framed to be an essential and active part of the artistic institutional structure in which practice is above discourse, but dependable on being turned into discourse within the culture industry that bolsters it through curatorial exposure, and in return the discursive job of curation transforms into practice as well. Thus, creating a new system of interdependence. Indeed, curatorial practices have been given authoritarian privileges due to the existence of this interdependence with artists, but also through their 'manipulation' of artist's work as raw material and their active input in the creation of meaning. Because they contextualise work in a new manner, they are given creative agency- sometimes, over the intentions of the artists themselves. In visual culture, artists are promoted, and their discursive authority is built in relation to external agencies. It is clear that authorship has transformed art into a social phenomenon in which the position of the author relies on external forms of social legitimation.

While controversial- especially when competing for the spotlight with the artist or even the artwork itself- many see the benefits in the rise of the curator especially from an anti-intentionalist perspective. Watkins believed that curating is a "necessary, if insufficient, medium through which the communication between art and its audience takes place" (Watkins, 1987). It is a slight shift away from an author-centred cultural hierarchy towards a post-productive discourse. In addition, because the anti-intentionalists argue that intentions conceived in the creative process are not necessarily reflected in the production, it is best to rely on such external agents such as curators (art historians, critics and conservators) to evaluate the artwork based on nothing but the site of the image itself.
This also gives curators the freedom to assign new and varied meanings to the work according to different projects and derive all meaning from the material and flexible elements of the work.

Rightly so, curators and their rise to fame derived not only from their positions of power within artistic institutions and their interdependent relationship with artists but also from their reframing as artists themselves.

While exhibitions and museums promote their dynamic installation, immersive spaces and extraordinary displays, the traditional division between professions becomes entangled and amorphous, “curators [now] sell their curatorial concepts as the artistic product and sell themselves as the artists.” (Neill, 2007, p.10). Paradoxically, curation owes its lack of stability as an incipient profession to its vagueness of definition, yet it is this same fluidity and transdisciplinarity that gives curators the creative licence that makes them in many eyes akin to artists. “As artistic production becomes increasingly deskilled—and, by extension, less identifiable by publics as art when placed outside the exhibition environment—exhibitions themselves become the singular context through which art can be made visible as art.[29] This alone makes it easy to understand why so many now think that inclusion in an exhibition produces art, rather than artists themselves. But this is a completely wrong approach.” (Vidokle, 2010). By deskilled, I believe the author refers to the way in which artistic production is becoming much less time consuming, and analogue, and much more technically automatized, digital or even ‘craftless’ like the mechanical work of Carlos Cruz Diez, the assisted work of Kehinde Wiley and Olafur Eliasson or even artists who utilise AI technologies. (Wolfe, 2023). This in turn may give precedence to curatorial practices and the exhibition setting.

However, one must also pay attention to the division of the work done behind the scenes of the museum in which knowledge is both generated and organised vs the public spaces in which it is displayed for the viewer’s passive consumption, “as it produces a monologic discourse dominated by the authoritative cultural voice of the museum.” (Bennett, 1995). Instead, Bennet suggests that the role of the curator should move away from that of the source of an expertise “whose function is to organise a representation claiming the status of knowledge and towards that of the possessor of a technical competence whose function is to assist groups outside the museum to use its resources to make authored statements within it.” (Bennett, 1995)

Otherwise, this system continues to make the exhibition setting the most prestigious and privileged platform in which art can be recognised as such, and curators the owners and designers of these privileged platforms. (Neill, 2007, p.13).

[29] See Tröndle et al, 2014, or The Exhibition Statement on page 29.

Chapter 3

✵

A Note on Curation

3.1 Curatorial Practices and Arrangements

In the early 20th century, Marcel Duchamp revolutionised our understanding of art with his collection of *Readymade* work; taking common objects (not created by the artist) and appropriating them as his own. In doing so, these objects metaphorically lost their functionality and transformed into new art through the simple act of being selected by the artist for display (sometimes accompanied by light manipulation). Curatorial practices work in a very similar manner. Watkins argued that the display of artwork is aided by the curator's manipulation of the environment, the lighting, the labels, and the placement of other works of art, much like Duchamp's famous *Fontaine* or *Roue de Bicyclette*. (Neill, 2007). In his lecture *Representation and the Media*, Hall argues that interpretation is a practice, "which is always going to be subverted; and, you know, the purpose of power, when it intervenes in language, is precisely to absolutely fix.". (Hall, 2005, p.20).

In the next section we will look at curation as a language through which the meaning of visual material is partially fixed; entailing arrangements and adjoining practices that instigate a certain interpretation and a certain way of reaching these interpretations.

When looking at exhibitions, one of the best approaches to artistic interpretation is semiology; mainly focused on the reception of visual material[30] and the site of audiencing as the producer of meaning. While according to Hall there is never one true final and exhaustive meaning, there is a 'preferred reading', one that is most commonly shared by viewers, often reflecting artistic intentions, and bolstered by the tools on the site of the image itself- "interpreted by audiences in ways that retain 'the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted on them." (Rose, 2016, p.155). These technical tools are what I will be referring to as curatorial arrangements, constituting the practical organisation and design of exhibitions through the aid of multiple and varied agencies.

[30] There may be a multiplicity of signs (not to be confused with pluralism) as well as the potential for one sign to transform into a different meaning. This refers to individual signs or codes but not entire works of art that contain many signs within and around them.

3.2 Labels

In contemporary exhibitions today it is very rare to come across an artwork that is completely isolated and unaccompanied by text. Whether this be a small label placed next to the art, a list supplying the audience with title and price of the displayed work, or a biography of the artist's life laminated on the wall; all make a significant difference in how viewers will approach, interact, experience and understand the visual material. A difference, which is often if not always overlooked, as the artist label has become an expected natural constituent of the exhibited artwork.

The artist label is the curatorial arrangement that best supports the ‘guidance’ of the viewer’s intentionalist interpretation, by highlighting the artist, their background and the context in which the work was created. When looking at the average artist label, the correct order of information includes; the name of the artist, title of the work, year it was made and media. This is often followed by a brief description about the artist themselves and why and/or how the work was created. Optionally, the size, collection or nationality of the artist is sometimes listed after the name. Artist labels tend to prioritise certain information over others, in particular, they make the artist the most important aspect of the artwork. And while the direct purpose of the art label *is* to recognise the artist and understand other modalities[31] that have shaped the creation of the work, the artist label can have an unwanted influence on our perception and interpretation of the work that may often go unnoticed. It represents the power of the author in defining not only the understanding, but the value of artwork, and the way the ‘author function’ establishes authenticity and creates discourse.

Imagine you walked into a small gallery with nothing but bare walls and artworks with no claim to ownership. The exhibition at Schirn Kunsthalle, appropriately titled "Anonymous: In the Future No One Will Be Famous", comprised works of anonymous artists and anonymous curators preaching “to remove the increasing barbarization of thought via short circuits and fast lanes created by the marketing of artists as brands whose works have become masterpieces in ignorance of philosophy.” The participants' anonymity would only end “after the date of expiration had been reached”, hinting at possible recognition in the future.[32] (Anonymous, 2007). This anonymity may heighten other senses and place more focus on the appreciation and understanding of the work itself.

At the end of *What is An Author*, Foucault actually proposes that “we can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author.

[31] The sites and modalities for the interpretation of visual material according to Gilian Rose include; the site of production, the site of the image itself, the site of audiencing and the site of circulation. The modalities are divided into technological, compositional and social.

[32] Due to a future identity reveal, this example does not reflect proper anonymity. (Rose, 2016).

Discourses, whatever their status, form, or value, and regardless of our manner of handling them, would unfold in a pervasive anonymity." (Foucault, 2010, p.10). While this might have been more achievable at an earlier stage in the history of visual culture, contemporary art discourse owes its foundation to artists, thinkers and other professionals working in and around the field.

Oscar Wilde put it beautifully in saying "The longer one studies life and literature, the more strongly one feels that behind everything that is wonderful stands the individual, and that it is not the moment that makes the man, but the man who creates the age." (Wilde, 2008, p.12). Wilde's ode to the creator, is a vote for the intentionalist who worships the figure of the artist. It is a prevalence reflected in our language and choices, in the way in which we reference a theory, idea or movement, by referencing the people who led and contributed to it. They are immortalised by it. "Discourse that possesses an author's name is not to be immediately consumed and forgotten; neither is it accorded the momentary attention given to ordinary, fleeting words. Rather, its status and its manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which it circulates." (Foucault, 2010, p.6). Moreover, detaching the artist from the artwork strips the work not only of contextual and historical weight but also jeopardises authenticity, credibility and reputability. Anonymity offers more equality at the risk of less recognition. Furthermore, the erasure of the author figure leaves us searching for another source of intention and/or meaning. For an anti-intentionalist approach to curation, the exclusion of the artist runs the risk of elevating curatorial authorship *over* artistic agency. So is the solution to rid ourselves of curatorial identity as well, like in "Anonymous: In the Future No One Will Be Famous"? Would this in turn elevate the agency of the artwork? Or leave us all confused?

While this in my opinion shouldn't be the case, and artwork should be allowed to exist in public anonymity, if this anonymity is not identifiable by other elements such as a strong and recognisable style, or a fictional persona/pseudonym, the chances of the artist being selected for an exhibition when faced against a familiar name are slim. The creator "as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed. Inasmuch as his immediate audience is inevitably attuned to the products of the past, the great [artist] who produces something original is doomed to be misunderstood." (Woodmansee, 1984, p.2). The intentionalist model values this sort of technical and stylistic knowledge about the artist- and so does the anti-intentionalist, to an extent. Wandsworth believes that one should attach meaning to a name, and thus focus on the author as a carrier of a specific idea, concept and/or brand. Placing the spotlight on the artist might cause them to be perceived more as personas, rather than individuals, which may reduce the psychologizing of the artist, or it may in fact cause the opposite effect, and further fuel the notion of 'artistic genius', by reducing the artist to a concept or idea.[33]

In *What is an Author* Foucault states "a private letter may have a signatory, but it does not have an author: a contract can have an underwriter, but not an author; and, similarly, an anonymous poster attached to a wall may have a writer, but he cannot be an author.

[33] This can also be referred to as 'fictionalist intentionalism' in which intentions are considered to be expressed by a "fictional or postulated" artistic persona/character- 'hypothetical intentionalism' when this is built from the presented public evidence. (Maes, 2008)

In this sense, the function of an author is to characterise the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society." (Foucault, 2010, p.7). The marking of the existence of an 'author figure' controls the authenticity and credibility of the work, gives the artist an opportunity to build a reputation, profit from the fame attached to their name, and encourages visibility of certain identities or voices that the artist may represent. However, it goes without saying that there is a long list of creators that have historically benefited from the preference of the intentionalist approach, dominated by the same people that hold power within visual culture and beyond it- even when there is a vast unacknowledged and uncelebrated group of authors, creatives and thinkers that have never been given proper credit for their work, because they did not meet the reductive and non-inclusive criteria of authorship to gain the title of 'genius'.

If this form of curation should continue, it must be modified to allow audiences the freedom to experience work independent of the artist's name and the fame it may or may not carry. Intentionalism should not be used for the continued adulation of the branded and renowned artist but work towards the elevation of marginalised voices and alternative narratives that challenge reductionist, normative and Eurocentric curatorial selection criteria. (Discussed in more depth in Chapter 4).

Figure 3: Lightning with Stag in Its Glare by Joseph Beuys, 1985

3.3 The Exhibition Statement

“What is the relationship between the artistic and the discursive, between what is being presented and displayed and what is being described.” (Borgdorff, 2011, p.58).

While artist labels offer rudimentary, albeit basic information about artwork, longer texts, such as exhibition statements, aim to translate the language of visual material into written words. In 1994, W.J.T Mitchell coined the term ‘image/text’ to emphasise their strong relationship, one that is almost codependent, as images are often understood in relation to not only other images but also other texts. Texts such as artist labels and especially exhibition statements are curatorial arrangements that help narrow down and connote a specific type of interpretation through language. This type of curatorial tool can be described as ‘anchorage’, and it is usually the most literal and direct way through which curation can assign meaning to individual pieces or entire exhibitions. The interrelation between image and text can be taken a step further by considering what Mieke Bal called ‘double exposure.’ In the words of Bal “When a critic writes about [art]… not only is the [art] interpreted and exposed to interpretation; the interpretation is also on display, exposing the… ideas to interpretation by others.” (Bal, 1996). Audiences follow a similar process when they choose to engage with curatorial texts and exhibition statements, as these are usually some of the first sights the viewer encounters, even before the work itself. “They want, as it were, a relationship between the image and a powerful definition of it to become naturalised so that that is the only meaning it can possibly carry.” (Hall, 2005, p.20). This is also comparable to Vattimo’s idea of truth being tied to rhetoric or language. Language holds the power to configure our reality, and its subjectivity and objectivity are all closely connected. Curatorial language can either limit or enrich our artistic experiences, and it does so based on our own definition, as the creation of discourse depends upon already existing discourse.

In *Enlightenment as Mass Deception,* Adorno references the artistic imitation of reality as a form of escapism, or distraction. The closeness of the work to reality obliterates the distance and ‘magic’ that characterises artistic ‘aura’ (as defined by Walter Benjamin).[34] It is the death of the public's spontaneity, imagination and requirement to think. Art with aura does not endeavour to completely and exhaustively mimic reality, as reality does not guarantee immersion, enjoyment or the so-called success of the artwork. Aura is dependent upon what it's missing.

[34] The concept of ‘aura’ is “the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be.” (Benjamin & Zohn, 2005).

With this in mind, curatorial practices that support intentionalist interpretation may be pushing for the decay of artistic aura,[35] through the demystification of the work. Because these texts are so prevalent, and almost an unspoken compulsory aspect of exhibitions, one questions the relevance of double exposure, whether audiences are interpreting the artwork, or the interpretation of the artwork written by the curators. Exhibition texts are ultimately interpretations of an interpretation that the viewers trust will reflect the intentions of the artist honestly and faithfully.

So what happens when the curatorial arrangements and the information do not match the artistic intentions? This is seen not only in the recurrence of incomprehensible exhibition texts, with widespread jargon and 'art talk', but also in exhibition statements that simply do not mirror the site of the image itself and the most ubiquitous viewer interpretation. This can also occur if the artist has failed to successfully express their intentions through their work, the curator has failed to convey the artistic intentions or a combination of both.

In 2006, Tate Modern displayed a large installation by German artist Joseph Beuy. The work called *Blitzschlag mit Lichtschein auf Hirsch* (*Lightning with Stag in its Glare*), was composed of organic and abstract shapes laid out on the floor to represent the artist's fascination with the forces of nature (see figure 3). The exhibition's statement used the artist's own words, as an explanation of the work. "The cart represents a goat, and the clods of bronze on the floor are primordial creatures. A small compass, mounted on top of a box, is another reference, with the lightning flash itself, to the natural energies of the earth." (Maes, 2008). This is a great example of when curation could have been used to further enhance the understanding of artistic intentions and enrich the viewer's experience (especially with elusive work such as this one). Instead, the audience was left to fend for themselves; unsatisfied and confused by the brief description of the amorphous elements. This is the curatorial intentional fallacy.[36]

Although in this case anchorage could've been used to better guide the viewer, most exhibition spaces, while displaying large walls of text with elaborate explanations regarding technique, background, or even the curation of the exhibition, don't actually guarantee viewers to stop, and read these texts? And when they do, are audiences encouraged by their initial interest in the work? An interest in the artist? Perhaps they are 'socially pressured' to engage with these texts by the expected behavioural codes demanded by the formal exhibition setting. Or is the very presence of the exhibition statement enough to affect the way we experience and interact with visual material? Even when one does not read them.

This is exactly what Martin Tröndle and his investigative team tried to discover in his study *The Effects of Curatorial Arrangements*.

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[35] "The desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction." (Benjamin & Zohn, 2005).

[36] The intentions do not mesh with the aesthetic and physical components of the work, and they are still taken into account via curatorial anchorage.

As the name suggests, the experiment examined the effects of curatorial and spatial reconfigurations on visitors' attention, with questions such as “How does information pertaining to the artwork affect visitors’ judgement of contemporary art?”. (Tröndle et al, 2014). The research project was carried out in 2009 and lasted three months. The title *11:1 (+3)* alluded to the exhibition’s structure, displaying eleven works from private collectors and three works obtained through the museum foundations. The display was designed according to classical exhibition formats, that is, a presentation featuring the core collections of the museum. (See Appendix C for exhibition floor plan).

Visitors were asked for consent to participate in the experiment, using eMotion technology, tracking and spatial behaviour as well as physiological measurements. They received a sensor glove[37] that was specially produced for the project and able to record the path of the participant as well as their heart rate and skin conductance level. Visitors also had to complete an entrance and exit survey in order to compare quantitative and qualitative data. The entrance survey included questions pertaining visit motivation, knowledge about art as well as standard socio-demographic variables.

The exit survey was much more personal, asking the participant thoughts about the work that had increased their psychological parameters the most (HR and SCL) and that had had the longest viewing time. Visitors’ complex behavioural and physiological data was then translated into visual cartographies.

[37] As a precautionary measure a test group was used to compare the results without the influence of the glove by use of the surveys. All in all, the influence of the glove on the survey had minimal effects. (Tröndle et al, 2014)

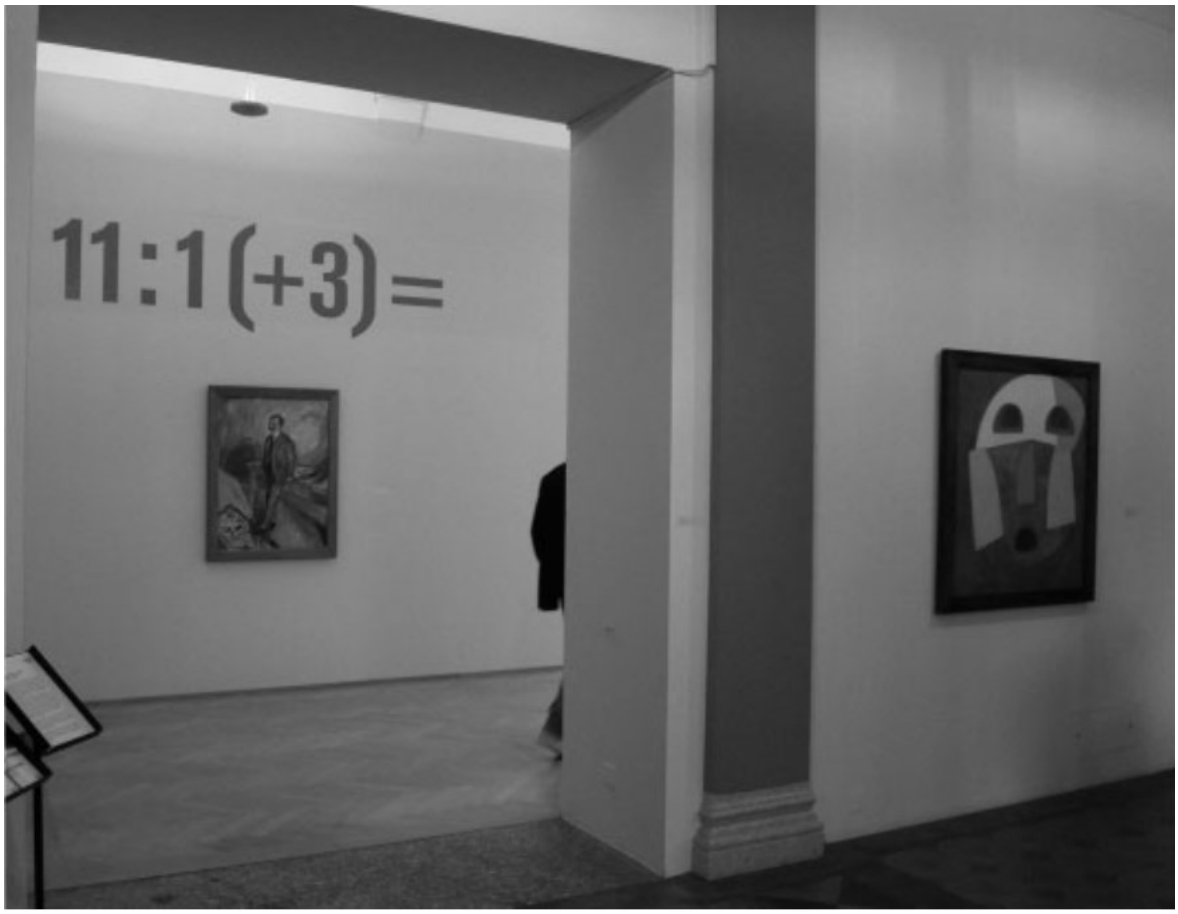

Figure 4: Experiment 1, Situation 0

Figure 5: Experiment 1, Situation 1

Figure 6: Experiment 1, Situation 2

The first experiment consisted of three tests carried out in the foyer area right next to the entrance of the exhibition. In Situation 0 (see figure 4), Ferdinand Gehr's *Angesicht* (1992) was hung in the foyer, in Situation 1 (see figure 5) no painting was hung and in Situation 2 (see figure 6) Lovis Corinth's *Selbstbildnis mit Schwarzem Hut und Stock* (1911) was hung (see Appendix D for experiment 1 cartographies). The test proved that the painting choice (figurative vs abstract) made little difference, and in all situations the visitors did not linger in the foyer, as work hung in this space was not officially within the borders of the exhibition. This was further emphasised by the signalisation of the entrance, that was distinguishably marked with a difference in wall colour (bright yellow), signage, different floor surfaces (wood) and most importantly text. The study proved that just the display of work within the exhibition setting, increases visibility, authority and impact, revealing what Tröndle called an 'esthetic viewing manner'. Artworks that did not occupy an official position within the curated exhibition space, did not generate the same manner of 'esthetic viewing experience', but rather everyday perception. Tröndle discovered that "highly complex networks of effects and force fields (via curatorial groupings, specific text-image arrangements, etc.) are formed within exhibitions; with every rearrangement, the composition and weighting of the space considerably redirected visitor attention." (Tröndle et al, 2014). The study provides empirical evidence of the theories and speculations discussed at the very end of Chapter 2; how the "inclusion in an exhibition produces art, rather than artists themselves" (Vidokle, 2010). Showing the way the site of audiencing not only provides the work with visibility and status but also marks artwork as such, revealing a major difference in the perception of artwork and everyday objects, in the eyes of the audience. This is the silent yet deep entanglement between curation, interpretation and perception.

Figure 7

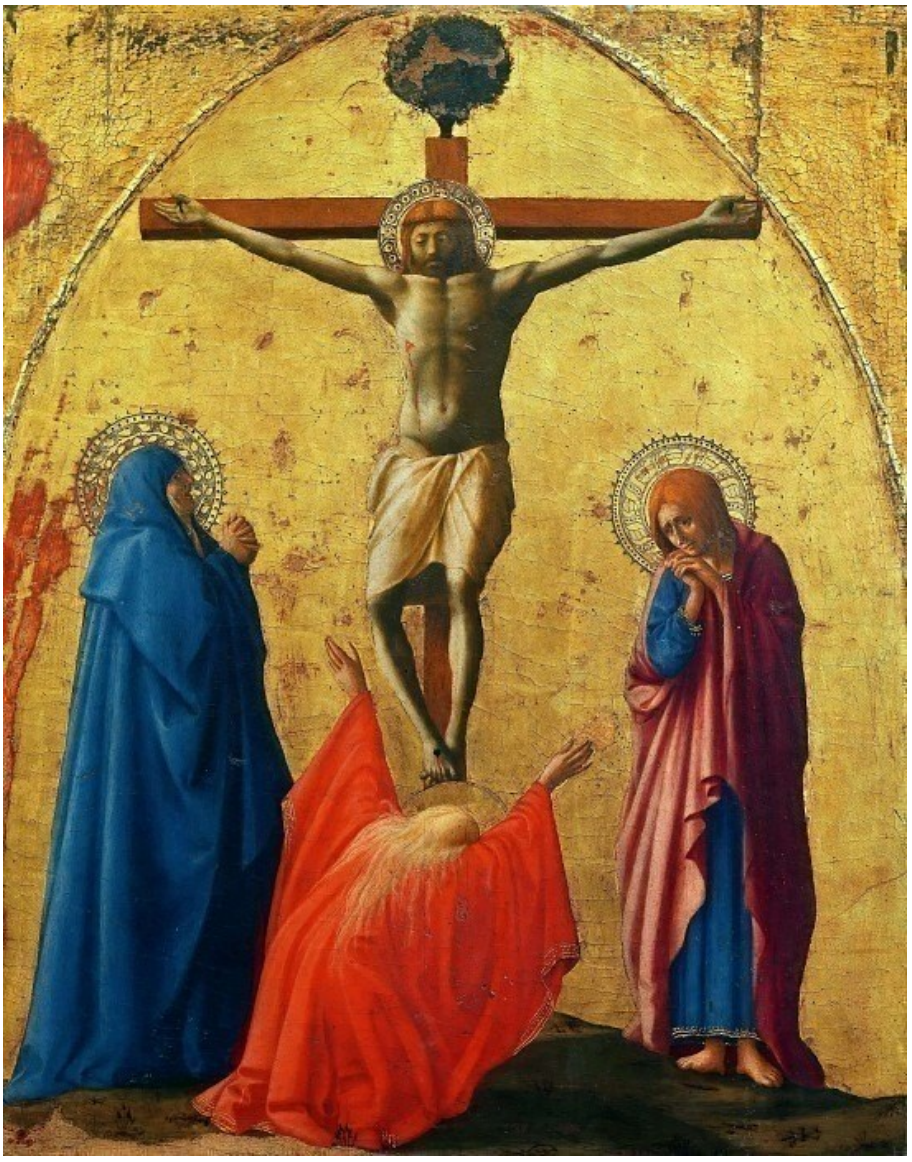

Figure 8: Crucifixion from the Pisa Altarpiece by Tommaso Masaccio, 1426, 83 cm × 300 cm

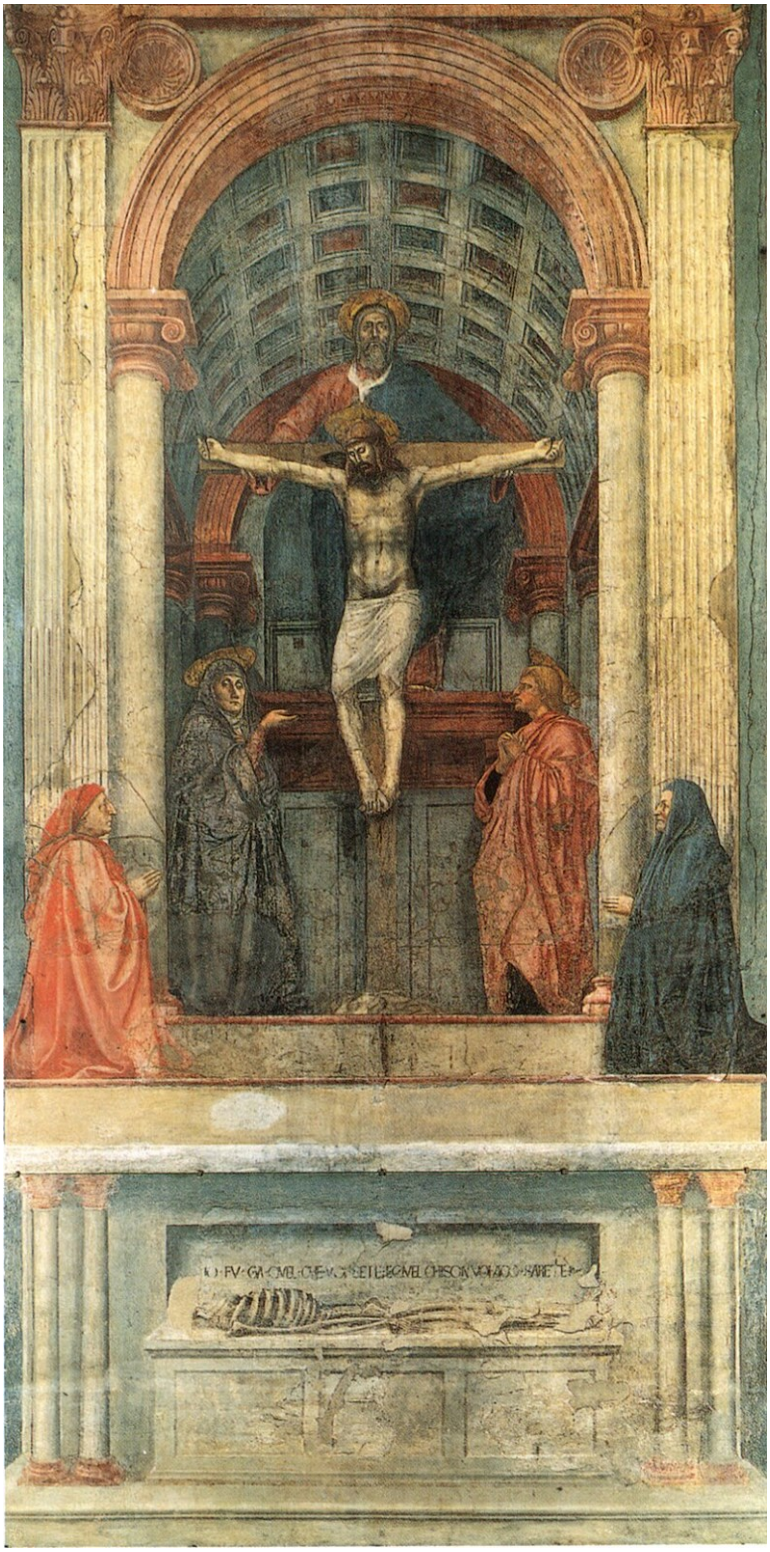

Figure 9: Holy Trinity by Tommaso Masaccio, 1426, 667 cm x 317 cm

Figure 10: Little Girl in a Blue Armchair, by Mary Cassatt, 1878, 89.5 cm x 129.8 cm

3.4 Hanging Practices

In the 17th century, the *Parisian salon style* had museum visitors crouching and cracking their necks in the hopes of catching a glimpse of the paintings peppering the walls of museums from floor to ceiling (see figure 8). This back breaking hanging method began to be questioned in the mid-1800s, and in an effort to improve viewing conditions Charles Eastlake, from London's National Gallery began to hang work at eye level instead. This resulted in emptier gallery walls, which brought about two new issues; the storage of artwork and the colour scheme of the now visible walls. Based on the latest research, Eastlake replaced the greyish green tones of the walls with a new deep red that contrasted the typical golden frames and cooler colours of the paintings. According to the research, this led to a more harmonious effect for the audiences' visual experience. (Cain, 2017). This red was soon replaced by 'light grey-brown' or 'dull yellow-grey' to modern white. The design of museums had not taken into consideration the storage of paintings, but with this new display method the need for someone to decide which works would remain on the wall and which ones would be removed became urgent. This led to the creation of professional curators, that did not yet exist in the 19th century.

The display of visual material does not simply entail measuring the distance between pieces and finding the perfect lighting for that painting. Our view of artwork from above, below, at eye level, all have a socio-cognitive impact on perception but also the interpretation of visual material. This is the 'logic of figuration', a term coined by Michael Ann Holly that illustrates the way in which something so trivial as the position of artwork in relation to the sight of the viewer will have an effect on how we read the piece. One might consider Tommaso Masaccio's *Crucifixion* 1426 (see figure 8) and *Holy Trinity* (see figure 9) from the same year. These works were made with linear perception, with the intentions and expectations that the spectator would view the work from a lower angle. Similarly, Mary Cassatt's *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* (see figure 10) from 1878, is believed to have been made to be seen from a lower angle. (Rose, 2016). Both painters use perspective to situate the viewer in a new position, both physically and psychologically; one by quite fittingly having the spectator look up at a painting depicting God and divinity, and the other by having the spectator adopt the perspective of a child.

These examples are distinctively different to the 20th century practice of curation where both the image and the audience are individualised through the hanging technique in which the viewer is at eye level with the works, giving more time and space for each work to be contemplated by itself. This shift was accredited to new modes of classification and relations with artists as well as changing notions of art.

Tröndle's study tested this, by investigating the effect of different contemporary hangings/installations on audience reception. The participating curators formulated questions that examined the effects of certain configurations, from "How does the exhibition space prefigure viewing conditions? Does the hanging of an artwork determine the duration during which it is viewed and how does the rearrangement of artwork affect the museum visitor?". (Tröndle et al, 2014).

Figure 11: Experiment 4, Situation 0

Figure 12: Experiment 4, Situation 1

Figure 13: Experiment 4, Situation 2

For the second experiment curatorial hanging conventions were observed in a different room; this time, inside the official exhibition parameters. In Situation 0 (see figure 11) the effects of compositional hanging were tested by positioning a dominant and larger female nude painting called *Beauty of Lines* sandwiched between two smaller paintings of mountains. In Situation 1 (see figure 12) *Beauty of Lines* was replaced by another mountain painting from the same collection and artist, Hodler, called *Thunersee mit Stockhornkette* using a nonhierarchical single line hanging style[38] (at eye level). In Situation 2 (see figure 13) the nude painting was placed in an adjacent corner while the mountains were left in the same positions as in Situation 1.

In situation 0, the hanging evoked a rather diffuse visitor movement and scarce attention, while Situation 1 resulted in recognizable centres of observation, in which the visitors paused to look at the works for a longer time. The curation of the works in situation 0 was designed to be dominated by the central nude painting. This arrangement resulted in unexpected findings, as the visitors perceived the artwork as more of an ensemble rather than individual pieces, causing the audience to stand far away from the works, and not consider them independently. “Apparently, dominant artworks are not able to organise the ‘force field’ of the exhibition space around themselves from every position in the room. Rather, based on the experimental findings presented, this force field appears to be possible only from particular locations.” (Tröndle et al, 2014).

In another curatorial reconfiguration, the hanging order of works hung side by side was readjusted by replacing the positions of the first piece with the last piece. Despite the reconfiguration, the viewer's attention began to dwindle as they moved along the row of works. This small test provided evidence that the first painting in a ‘relatively balanced series’ will get the most attention and will work hierarchically.

Tröndle’s study claimed to be the first to empirically demonstrate the effects of specific curatorial configurations on visitors' attention through their particular advanced methodology and technical setup. It is clear that the study cannot claim to have revealed visitors' thoughts or the work's direct impact on the audience, (despite the entrance/exit interviews). Nonetheless, the study provided evidence of knowledge that had previously existed only tacitly; as the subtle interaction between audiences and artworks remains essentially invisible.[39] (See Appendix E for complete findings).

As demonstrated in these experiments, hanging order can exert considerable influence on the distribution of visitor attention. Part of the artwork’s power of attraction derives from the curatorial arrangement in which it is embedded, sometimes this influence may supersede those of any intrinsic property of the artwork itself.

[38] “According to this convention, every painting claims the same prominence.” (Tröndle et al, 2014.)
[39] It should be noted that the results are the outcome of a small pilot study carried out in a fine art museum in Switzerland, therefore the results cannot be generalised. However, given the almost ubiquitous curatorial approaches of artwork and text display across many fine art museums, the results should be considered to offer a sampled size of the effects of curatorial arrangements on audience attention.

In fact, as we have seen time and time again, the very act of displaying visual material within the exhibition setting, provides more than mere exposure, but the chance of gaining a special type of attention that Tröndle called ‘esthetic viewing’. Due to this perception, audiences relate to the displayed work differently, which is why, *what*, and *how* artworks are curated within the site of audiencing matters and should be observed further.

3.5 Viewing Practices & Others

“The space of the museum becomes one in which art, in being abstracted from real life contexts, is depoliticized. The museum, in sum, constitutes a specific form of art's enclosure which, in Crimp's postmodernist perspective, art must break with in order to be more socially and politically relevant.” (Bennett, 1995). When work is exhibited in a contemporary art space, it is removed from its place of birth; from its raw, natural environment into a curated setting with different accessibilities and conjectures than the site of production. How is the artwork affected by this change in context? Interpretatively, socially and even economically? And what exactly differentiates the display of artwork at the site of production in comparison to the site of audiencing?

One of the most significant disciplines of exhibition spaces is the almost universal rule of ‘no touching’. Objects are displayed behind glass cases, ropes are placed in front of paintings, even heat sensors will set off an alarm if one gets too close to the masterpieces. The Foucauldian question must be, what kind of subjectivities does this produce? These measures do not only safeguard the artwork but ensure that the viewer remains true to its semantic definition, the viewer views, rather than touches.[40] This creates a separation between the audience and the visual material that is generated by the idea of fragility, authority and/or value of the artwork.

In *The Age of Art in The World of Mechanical Reproduction,* Walter Benjamin introduces the concept of ‘aura’ as “the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be.” (Benjamin & Zohn, 2005). Rituality and presence, both constitute his definition of artistic aura, mirroring the ways in which curatorial arrangements can create such separation and distance between the viewer and the artwork, enhancing (or even generating) the aura of displayed art. Rituality is part of the early essence of aura. The first impressions of aura were visible in religious practices, rituals and cult images. Religious iconography and the cult image have always functioned with a certain standard of distance, which is never affected by its physical proximity. “The essentially distant object is the unapproachable one.” (Benjamin & Zohn, 2005). Similarly, this untouchability is translated on to the exhibited art. Because despite the closeness of the work, the distance created by the curatorial arrangements is more so psychological than physical.

Aura is also intrinsically tied to presence. In many religious and ritualistic practices, aura is understood as a form of energy or light emanating from a divine and powerful figure. The distance which characterises aura- seen in the representation of distance between divinity and mortality- is comparable to the distance between the viewer and the artwork.

[40] This also includes the rules forbidding eating and sometimes drinking.

The aura of art is bound to the presence of the art object, a presence that must be authentic, and nothing validates presence, authenticity and tangibility more than the protection of the work from external forces: the physical and metaphorical elevation of the work and its value through curatorial arrangements. In some sense, this notion is connected to capitalism, and the way it produces its own mysterious aura when the idea of what is valuable and meaningful is always tied to context, influx and signs of ownership. We understand that it is constructed and yet it is hard to reorder the rules by which it operates.

The design and decoration of the exhibition space itself can be a whole artistic endeavour of its own and also has its effects on the way we interact and relate to the work on display. In contemporary 'white cube' galleries, walls are often painted white, the seating is modern and minimal; located in areas that aim to give more visibility to certain works. Some galleries and museums even utilise seating beyond their practical purpose, as a way to indicate which artworks require some pause or are especially deserving of our attention. (Rose, 2016, p.267). A radical example of this can be seen in the seating of 'Urgent Painting'[41] that was colour-coded in order to illustrate which curator had selected which artist, so much so that the curatorial team- made up of 17 international curators- almost stole protagonism away from the renowned artist and their paintings. The 66th issue of Frieze magazine covered the exhibition stating, "Given the celebrity factor of the participating curators, this strategy seemed to validate the artist through curatorial association more than through the quality of their work." (Montagu, 2002). I agree that the strength of an exhibition like 'Urgent Painting', which claimed to bring relevance back to the art of painting, should have derived from the artworks, rather than what the curators had done with the colourful interior design. This exhibition could be understood as a failed anti-intentionalist experiment, in which the focus shifted from the artist to the curator. This made the exhibition just another alternative to the intentionalist model.

Beyond furniture, and the design of the space itself, even the interaction between other works, can have a huge effect on audience behaviour and attention. In Tröndle's fourth experiment, a space was manipulated by the addition of a large sculpture (situation 0), followed by an empty space (situation 1), a smaller work (situation 2), followed again by the large sculpture (situation 3). In Situation 0, the placement of the sculpture, in the middle of the room, seemed to push people away from the works on the walls. This simple experiment demonstrated the influence of spatial weighting at the site of audiencing (when only one work placement is altered) and gave tangible evidence of the way in which it can affect the interactions between artwork and visitor's attention. (see Appendix F for experiment 4 cartographies).

While all these different exhibition models and spaces have their own economies, their own disciplines, their own rules for how their particular spectator should behave and look they are all rudimentarily similar. In *Spaces of Experience*, Charlotte Klonk argues that the [white cube] exhibition model "is remarkably similar in galleries in very different places and with very different external architectural forms." (Klonk, 2009).

[41] Exhibition at the Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, curated by Laurence Bosse, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Julia Garimorth at ARC in 2002

The layout of the white cube gallery is meant to be a homogenous undistracted and immaculate space that centres on art. The minimalism of this blank canvas serves only to heighten the appearance of the work and once more ensures that the viewer is unencumbered by nothing but looking. Perhaps, due to the young history of curation and the ubiquitousness of the processes and technical practices, this model has become the standard that curators fear to deviate from. So, what form of critical visual methodology does the white cube and other curatorial models encourage in the viewer? This will be the topic of our following and final chapter.

Chapter 4

✷

Curation from Theory to Practice

4.1 Curating Intentionalism

In Chapter 1, Wimsatt and Beardsley proposed anti-intentionalism as an objective counter theory to intentionalism. However, it is clear that not many exhibitions move away from the traditional author centric, informational and contextually rich intentional curatorial approaches. Is it however as objective as the theorists claim? Is the purpose to guide our comprehension of the work on display? Educate the audience as it was in Medieval Europe? Is it a marketing strategy to bring attention to a specific individual, event, or ideology? Or perhaps a way to profit from the glorification of the artistic genius? Such author centrism and the prevalence of intentionalism is pushed by the influence of capitalism and neoliberal values that depend on entrepreneurial self-promotion, social branding and exposure.[42] As discussed in Chapter 2, the preference of the intentionalist approach has been partially caused by our redefinition of authorship. This however has a newfound meaning in the contemporary art scene in which our understanding of 'artist' has become more and more entangled with our understanding of 'curator'- who, as previously mentioned, has become the provider of visibility, authenticity, status and even monetary profit- while also benefiting themselves through the success of their selected artists.

But why should we care about the popularity of intentionalist exhibition models? In *The Birth of the Museum,* Bennett clarifies that exhibitions created a new setting for the dissemination of culture, through art and art objects, allowing them to be refashioned in ways that would facilitate their use as novel governmental programmes aimed at reshaping general norms of social behaviour. (Bennett, 1995) If visual material has such a large impact on the 'reshaping of social and cultural norms', it is vital to consider what type of artwork has been given more visibility through institutions' intentionalist framework and how curation influences the dominant visual Scopic regime. Is it possible to break away from harmful side effects of intentionalism towards a more egalitarian interpretation, through curation?

Although Stuart Hall primarily focuses on popular culture and images within mass media, his foundational model for audience meaning transmission is important to consider for the disaffiliation of intentionalist interpretation. This model is made up of two processes: encoding and decoding.[43] 'Encoding' (not as central to this research) is when a code becomes part of the semiotic structure of visual material. While 'decoding' refers to the audience's proactive formation of interpretation and meaning making process. Hall argues that audiences tend to *encode* the *'dominant code*', which in turn bolsters already existing political, economic, social and cultural order.

[42] Social media, sponsors, gallery representation, powerful patrons, celebrity endorsements etc.
[43] A code is a conventionalised way of meaning making specific to a particular audience or group or people. (Rose, 2016).

Author Stanley Fish also introduces the idea of a code, or codes shared by similar receptors (audience members), who make similar choices and observations, these codes circulate and form what he calls an 'interpretative community.'[44] (Fish, 1976). When this example is applied directly to visual culture it helps explain the formation of the dominant visual Scopic regime. In practice and artistic discourse, this hegemony is widely present.

When it comes to the interpretation of visual material, Hall also designates three categories; preferred, oppositional[45] and negotiated[46] reading. As previously mentioned, the preferred reading supports the hegemony, and thus intentionalism in trusting the sources and/or creators' intentions and artistic interpretations. In order to even attempt to break away from this hegemony, one must remove the guidance towards a 'dominant code' (aided by the physical curatorial arrangements discussed in Chapter 3) and find a way to integrate the artistic intentions into the work with a focus on *intentions* rather than just the *artist*.

Nonetheless, it would be completely naive to dismiss the value and potential of intentionalism in providing new perspectives and opportunities when we use it in an effective, fair and unbiased manner. When considering curatorial practices, it is important to remember that the audience is normally interested in statements of intentions and the artist's agency. The popularity of this movement is not only founded on our adulation of the author figure but a genuine interest of the viewer to know the intentions of the artist and how these have (or have not been) manifested in the work. However, if we were to defend intentionalism, as it stands today, we should not embrace reductionist approaches that ban other forms of interpretation based on information that does not pertain to the artist.

In *The Age of Art in The World of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin complains that "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence." (Benjamin & Zohn, 2005, p.3). Intentionalist curation can be of great use when applied to visual material with such historical weight or work whose author is no longer present. "Historical interpretation labours...to reintegrate in us the psychological conditions which have changed in the course of history. It… enables us to see a work of art (a physical object) as its author saw it in the moment of production." (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946, p.5). Not only can such curation help us understand the original artistic intentions but may allude back to the site of production while at the site of audiencing.

In many cases, artistic intentions are necessary for the comprehension and therefore impact of the work, and these can sometimes only be understood through contextual knowledge.

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[44] Although Fish -like many other theorists in this essay- refers to text based work, his theories regarding interpretive communities and its limits and authorial intent can and have been applied alternatively.

[45] "Understands what the [news] is saying but challenges the way it affirms the dominant order of things…counter-hegemonic". (Rose, 2016, p.281). It is realising that the artistic intentions have not been successfully transmitted by the work (intentional fallacy) reverting instead to personal interpretation (anti-intentionalism).

[46] The central position between these two extreme opposites (oppositional and preferred reading).

As a response to the 2015 ‘TRANSART Festival’, for the City of Perth temporary public art commission. Artist Lee Harrop created the piece ‘I See Red’, consisting of a red neon sign that read, ‘SACRED SCARED SCARRED’, with the word ‘red’ as the suffix of each word. The words were lit in two stages. In the first stage, the entire words would light up “SACRED SCARED SCARRED.” In the second, only the last three letters would glow revealing the words “RED RED RED.” This work was set to be placed on top of the old courthouse law museum of Perth, which was crucial to the work's meaning and interpretation due to its embodiment of political power, historical significance as well as its multi-purposeful uses throughout time.

The artist said “There are various opportunities to read the history of this building, which serves as a placeholder in the landscape…The deliberate positioning of my art within a local perspective in a contemporary context allows the work and the message contained therein to be relative to that local audience. Ultimately, the work is always open to interpretation and reconfiguration. This is essentially the fundamental intention.” (Harrop, 2022).

However, the judges of the Supreme Court of Western Australia believed that the application of the words ‘‘scared’ and ‘scarred’ to a building so long associated with the administration of justice was ‘entirely inappropriate’. Context and site were integral to the understanding of the work, as well as the use of language as a metaphor and sign. The judges interpreted the words ‘SCARED AND SCARRED’ as a direct attack on the old courthouse but had no objections to the word SACRED. They were provided with an explanation of the artist's works, in which the multiplicity of meanings of the work was outlined and did not correspond with the final judgement of the judiciary panel.

As an avid supporter of intentionalism, Harrop contested that the decommission and subsequent PhD thesis of *I See Red*, clearly demonstrated that the principles of intentionalism provide guidance towards ethical and socially engaged artistic practices in the twenty-first century, and that the disregard of artistic intentions may not only cause erroneous interpretation but may lead to larger epistemic injustices. (Harrop, 2022).

4.2 Curating Anti-Intentionalism

“One does not need to know the artist's private intentions; the work tells us.” (Sontag, 1964) was one of the many rules that constituted the esoteric sensibility that Susan Sontag described in her essay *Notes on Camp* in 1964. Unknowingly, Sontag presented a notion of art that perfectly reflected the anti-intentionalist position. Camp art is meant to be appreciated through its physical features, and the artistic intentions are purely aesthetic. There is simply no need for deeper references as the work will speak for itself. But can one have such freedom of interpretation without any knowledge? While Sontag’s words are directed specifically at camp art, which according to her descriptions cannot intentionally hold conceptual or political meanings, camp art can still be interpreted in such a way or do so involuntarily by placing aesthetics over morality. The lack of commentary becomes a commentary in itself. Sontag also touches upon the idea of the ‘good eye’ or ‘perfect viewer’ in saying that camp art can only be truly understood by affluent societies that carry knowledge about art in order to comprehend it. This becomes yet another example of an anti-intentionalist approach to interpretation dependent upon a very intentionalist background.

This same dichotomy is seen at the site of audiencing as well. As discussed in Chapter 1, anti-intentionalism is rarely if ever reflected in curatorial choices. Galleries traditionally adopt an intentionalist curation, which may cause the actual work to become secondary to statements of artistic intentions. This is the *death of interpretation*; once meaning is established through curatorial framing the viewer no longer *works* to interpret the piece. They may check the enmeshment of language and the art object, but do not actively seek meaning. As previously discussed, this is in line with the demystification of artistic aura through intentionalist curation.

In an anti-intentionalist approach to curation, it must be noted that the less information presented about the work, the less we know about why or how it may speak to a specific theme, or whether the artistic intentions might be highly dependent on the identity/identities of the creator(s). However, this lack of information also offers the audience the chance for a more open interpretation based on compositional and aesthetic qualities, but also personal experiences and perspectives. Once more, I wish to reference the words of Oscar Wilde in saying “The meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it. Nay, it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvellous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age, so that it becomes a vital portion of our lives.” (Wilde, 2008).

Wilde argues for agency and interpretation to be shared in equal but different manners between the creator and the viewer- but it is ultimately the viewer who imbues the work with significance, both personally and culturally, but also contemporarily through their interpretation.

One cannot judge exhibitions solely based on curation without taking into account the dominant discursive system within the artistic institution itself. Like Wilde, these consider audiences essential and unanimous collaborators of an exhibition where the artwork is manipulated by the curator to provide a specific and creative perspective. Success is always attributed to something or someone outside the object or the practice itself; that is the contact with the viewer- who in anti-intentionalist opinion should hold all the power of interpretation.

Of course, once an idea is put out there, as a creator there are limits to how much one can control how it is used and/or understood. Due to this, anti-intentionalists push for the focus to be removed from the author to the work itself, and the interpretation to be left in the hands of the audience. The founders of anti-intentionalism, Wimsatt and Beardsley, claimed that the unity of an artistic work is not found in its *origin* but its *destination*, specifying that this destination cannot be personal, "the viewer is without history, biography, psychology; they are simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text (artwork) is constituted." (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946, p.8). In this way, the social modalities of interpretation are taken out of the equation.

Similarly, practices that try to adopt an anti-intentionalist form of curation, ensure that the artist is 'without history, biography or psychology'. In *Art Worlds,* Howard Becker states that organising an art world requires sufficient political and economic freedom. A lack of these sometimes results in unintentional anonymities; a preference for anti-intentionalism as a form of protection and liberty. (Becker, 1982). This type of anti-intentionalist curatorial framework is achieved by designing exhibition spaces that provide alternative, minimal, or even unclear curatorial arrangements of artistic intentions. Many professionals achieve this by using some form of anonymity.[47]

No Tag, Pseudonymity + Alter- Egos, exhibited in 2009 at la Casa Encendida in Madrid, was a project designed and organised by art historian and curator Emma Brasó and co-curated by Hector Sanz Castaño. This exhibition explored the reasons behind the lack of visual art projects that embrace pseudonyms/anonymity in comparison to its prevalence in literary and textual works; questioning the relationship between authorship and fiction. It included projects by the Guerilla Girls and ACT UP, anonymous collectives like Bernadette corporation and artist anonymous, artists working under multiple identities like Bruce Conner and Joan Fontcuberta as well as fictional artists like Darko Maver. The curators presented the different reasons behind the anonymity of the artists (including fictional or para-fictional artists) but were not prepared to go completely unacknowledged themselves. However, in their catalogue entry they included a foreword by Antonio Ramirez (their professor at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid), written under his publicly acknowledged pseudonym Clavelinda Fuster.

"Life is a dream—that is, the individual is simply an actor playing perhaps one, or possibly various different roles. The self doesn't exist. We shouldn't be surprised by people's later fascination with the notion of a double identity, and with all manner of masks and cross-dressing.

[47] As previously mentioned, these can offer creative freedom and protection with a new kind of openness for interpretation as well as a level of equality and unbias when dealing with curatorial criteria.

From this perspective, the multiple, invented, personal names of Fernando Pessoa are only the refined réplicas, reproduced in the context of high literary culture, of an underworld inhabited by Fantomas, Caligari, The Phantom of the Opera, Superman, Batman, The Spirit, the Bearded Woman of the circus, and an endless stream of other doubles and double-acts…What I'm trying to say is that if every human being is an impostor, the disguise reaches a sort of paroxysm in the case of the creative artists. It wouldn't matter if the creator signed the piece or not, if he/she were one person or another. The name—who did this or that— is only useful later on, so as to organise the junk in the museums, in the antique shops, in the library catalogues—and so as to fill the sacks of the vanities - Clavelinda Fuster, c'est moi?" (Brasó, 2017).

Clavelinda Fuster frames 'the artist' as a mere fragment of a person, that does not constitute the whole and is therefore irrelevant in defining interpretation. The self, the figure of the artist does not exist but to work as a label for intentionalism.

Anti-intentionalism removes this label but still gives precedence to the agency of the artist and their artwork. In acknowledging the agency of the work and its materiality in eliciting, psychological, social and emotional effects, regardless of artistic intentions, one also acknowledges the artists themselves. The sovereignty of the artist has always been subdued, with countless examples through history of creative censorship and artistic limitation; ethically, politically, economically, dictated by institutions, critics, curators, academics, collectors and dealers- figures of wealth and power, who have manipulated intentions, and deviated interpretations. While this may be taken for granted now, historically artistic self-determination has been fought for over and over again. In giving autonomy and agency to the artwork to determine its own faith at the hands of the viewers, one grants that same freedom to the artist (and curators) behind the work.

This can be seen in the exhibition *Agency Without Intention*, organised in 2015 at the Herbert Read Gallery at Canterbury by Brasó and triggered by the artist's fascination with the idea of artworks making decisions themselves; exploring the possibilities of materiality and agency, without the overbearing presence of intention. "The goal was to explore the apparent contingent relation between actions and purposes in the technological, aesthetic, social, and political realms." (Brasó, 2017, p.126). Although this exhibition welcomed work that goes beyond the media explored in this thesis[48], the inclusion of what the curator called a 'social sculpture' is worth considering. This multi part work called *Liminal*, consisted of more than 70 wooden blocks that could be moved around and manipulated by the audience.

The exhibition text read, "visitors are invited to activate the work with the hope that their participation will provoke moments of unsolicited disorientation, exchange, and discussion." (Brasó, 2017, p.130). Brasó was trying to unravel limited agency disguised as 'creative and interpretative freedom' when placed against strong artistic or curatorial intentions. While the audience interacted with the work, Abdulbari Kutbi's Pirouette Robots wandered around the gallery space, bumping into *Liminal's* geometric shapes.

[48] Performance art, in the form of dancers, and digital media, as recorded video.

Brasó selected the robots to “present a very practical example of an agent without apparent intention: the robots were able to make simple decisions when confronted with physical obstacles thanks to a system of interconnected modes, yet their actions could hardly be interpreted as following a complex purpose of their own. Or could they?...It was encouraging, from my [Brasó’s] perspective, that several of the participants agreed with the possibility for artworks to produce in the recipient effects unintended by their creators.” (Brasó, 2017). Brasó defined artistic agency as “the decisions and actions involved in the making of art” (Brasó, 2017), and aimed to show its application on work itself with the intention to produce effects unrelated to the intentions of the artist. Conversing with the audience, Brasó was able to establish that intention operates at a personal/collective level, but agency is relational and dependent on the position within a group or in a situation. The creation of an artwork whose intention was to mimic a lack of conscious intention, also tackled what Wimsatt and Knapp called ‘intentionless meaning’, which in turn gave rise to a multiplicity of meanings and opened the work to interpretations beyond the intentions of the artist.

4.3 Discourse

Hamlet and Socrates both defined art as a mirror held up to nature but constructed this analogy quite differently. While Socrates saw mirrors as reflecting what we can already see; “art insofar as mirrorlike, would yield idle and accurate duplications of the appearances of things, and would therefore be of no cognitive benefit whatsoever.[49] Hamlet, more acutely, recognized that reflecting surfaces show us what we could not otherwise perceive--our own face and form-and so art, insofar as it is mirror-like, reveals us to ourselves, and is, even by Socratic criteria, of some cognitive utility after all.” (Danto, 1964). Stuart Hall believed that concepts, and therefore our depiction and representation of these concepts through visual material, are more than reflections of what is already seen, but representation of concepts that do not exist, until expressed through such depictions, much like Hamlet. The discourse created by visual material/objects is subjected to forgetfulness/repression/criticism, which in turn give rise to the need to uncover some ‘hidden meaning’ requiring external interpretation. So, while Socrates was right in saying that art was mirrorlike in depicting what already is, as what we already see, the way we see these things and the way we perceive reality differs from one person to the next, and while art can reflect ‘idle duplications of things’, as well as artistic intentions, it can also offer a revelation of own subjectivities and interpretation in response to these realities.

While both intentionalist, and anti-intentionalist theories as well as their accompanying curatorial practices have demonstrated their impact on interpretation, we cannot fail to mention the tacit dominance of discourse.[50] It is important to note that freedom of interpretation, and subjectivity itself is also subject to certain disciplines. The image and its meaning can never be fully and eternally fixed, it is tied to the schemas of interpretation, which are brought to bear upon it. In this sense “visual discourses already have possible positions of interpretation (from which they ‘make sense’) embedded in them, and the [audiences] bring their own subjective desires and capacities…which enable them to take up positions of identification in relation to its meaning.” (Rose, 2016, p.175). Therefore, all forms of interpretation, whether approached in an anti-intentionalist or intentionalist (or even moderate) manner are affected by existing discourse to some extent**.**

While this process of ‘making sense’ or ‘interpreting’ remains subject to variation regarding cultural context and is different for each individual, we need (and have) some common ground between us.

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[49] Supporting Danto’s criticism of art as imitation.

[50] Discourse is defined by Foucault as a form of understanding the way artistic institutions, systems or figures of power as well as the history of visual culture have a big impact on the way we interact and the way in which we form meaning within art. (Rose, 2016).

For “if we shared no concepts together…we literally could not make sense of the world today. Meaning arises because of the shared conceptual maps which groups or members of a culture or society share together.” (Hall, 2005, p.10).

Furthermore, and maybe not quite in line with Hall, I believe that there are ways in which we make sense of things we do not collectively understand or have the same notion of, that have been subtly taught to us. “The particular classifications that we use to classify out the world meaningfully is not printed in anybody’s genes; it is something that is learned.” (Hall, 2005, p.11).

Regarding the critical analysis of visual material/ artistic interpretation, it is not simply taught, it is *curated;* physically, culturally, and socially. The way we make sense of images is not ‘naturally born’ or automatic, although it may appear to be so.

Curator and art historian, Lynda Nead explains that the “discourse of art in the 19th century [consisted of] the concatenation of visual images, the language and structures of criticism, cultural institutions, publics for art and the values and knowledges made possible within and through high culture” (Rose, 2016), suggesting that predominant, historical (or even imposed/taught) systems of knowledge are available and ingrained socio-cognitively as well as culturally. However, it is important to note that at least according to Foucault, discourse is not hierarchical, because power is everywhere, since discourse too is everywhere - and this discourse is multiple, varied and intertextual. While I do believe that this diversity exists within discourse, my research has shown that undoubtedly a ‘popular discourse’ exists, whether you attribute it to a dominant code or call it a ‘preferred reading’, it is something instilled into us. “The production of meaning is not…something that just happens because the word is already fixed out in its meanings which don’t change. The production of meaning means that there is a kind of symbolic work…a practice, which has to go on in giving meaning to things and in communicating that meaning to someone else...Who has the power, in what channels, to circulate which meanings to whom?” (Hall, 2005 p.15). The institutional location of discourse has an impact on whether that discourse is the dominant one, and historically those with influence and power have had the resources to make their discourses substantial through books and pictures, and these were the materials then put into libraries and archives, later visible in other media and reflected in practice. (Rose, 2016). It is this same knowledge within this particular dominant discourse that trickles down through generations and is still embedded in contemporary visual culture today.

Conclusion

To anti-intentionalists, the intentionalist is a coddled child, guarded by its overbearing helicopter parent, unable to make decisions of its own. For intentionalists, the willfully ignorant anti-intentionalist wanders around the art world, making blind assumptions, most of which have no foundation in truth. The aim of this thesis has not been to find one true method of interpretation or meaning, but rather to reveal that these theories of artistic interpretation already have practical applications in contemporary visual culture, and an understanding of them may help us create an alternative method(s) that combines the best aspects of both approaches.

It was a challenge to find appropriate ways of framing the contributions of practice-led artistic outputs in conjunction to the theories they allude to. Every effort to separate theory from practice seemed to undermine the very point I was trying to prove- that intention, matter and meaning are inextricably linked. I soon realised that this entanglement was actually validation for my argument.

I was primarily concerned with figurative and predominantly Western art, examining how it is experienced, and interpreted, within contemporary art spaces such as galleries and museums (some of which are context-specific). I chose my examples (from both the site of audiencing and the site of the image itself), in keeping with my ability to speak from these platforms as a curator and even more so as an artist. My aim was to use a range of sources, from literary theory to case studies, to identify, critique, and reinterpret the role of artist intention, viewer interpretation, and autonomy of the artwork to investigate how these different agencies generate meaning. This analysis included reviewing the theories regarding intentionalism and anti-intentionalism discussed in Chapter 1, the subsequent exploration of these theories through a historical look at the evolution of the author figure and museum's early pedagogical purpose and influence on intentions in Chapter 2, their practical application via different curatorial arrangements and the contextualisation of work in Chapter 3 and the implications of the practical applications of these theories in Chapter 4.

In my personal experience, and my visits to galleries and museums (which was heightened during my research for this thesis), it seems as if curators, and artistic institutions, even artists themselves have set themselves up for the 'failure of the work'.[51] Explanations are always expected at exhibitions, to help us make sense of the work. While in many cases I have found this helpful, enriching and even necessary for a more exhaustive comprehension of the work, I am convinced it takes away from the simple act of looking. Before we even see the artwork, we are often greeted with an introductory text about the artist, their life, the media, the subject.

[51] At least in anti-intentional ways, like the intentional fallacy.

It is assumed that the intentions of the artist will not be successfully conveyed through the work itself and instead the audience is offered a curatorial clutch to lean on. Moreover, while many works are said to be 'open to interpretation', when this freedom is offered alongside an explanation, more often than not this puts an end to the act of interpreting.

On the other hand, the extreme opposite of such intentionalist approach- as seen from the examples in this thesis- seems to be some form of anti-intentionalist anonymity, in which curators and artists as well as other participants in the production and display of the work remain unknown. But is there a form of anti-intentionalist curation that does not involve complete or partial anonymity? Some truce between these two interpretative methods?

It would be challenging yet innovative to create more spaces in which visual material is displayed with no direct anchorage to bolster artistic or curatorial intentions- thus forcing people to not only look but also *reflect*, make connections and actively engage with the material all around them- preserving some of Benjamin's artistic 'aura.' Audiences should work to reach their interpretations, even if afterwards they find out that their interpretation is completely 'wrong' in comparison to the curatorial and/or artistic message. There are many more benefits than losses in a *heuristic* approach to interpretation; one that can be guided by subtle curation but not completely dominated by it. Philosopher Zygmunt Bauman defined this type of curation perfectly in saying "There would be an element of interpreting...giving [the audience] some sort of alphabet for reading what they see but cannot quite decide about.". (Neill, 2007, p.12). Embracing a form of curation that is not dictatorial, would allow power to be shared by the different agencies at play at the site of audiencing, without diminishing others. That way the viewer can decide which form(s) of interpretation they wish to follow based on case-to-case examples.

An artist that described my ideal, albeit diplomatic and centrist approach to artistic interpretation or even personal expectations of artwork, is artist Miguel Angel Rego Robles, who I had the privilege of meeting through an intensive curatorial workshop in the winter of 2023. Miguel spoke about his work, and mentioned how for him the material and aesthetic qualities of the work should speak for themselves first. "It is important to show specific aesthetics to the audience, and if they are interested, they can talk and discuss the projects in more depth." (Robles & Koskinen). This led me to ask the following question.

Me: "I am very interested in the reception and interpretation of your work. Do you hope that Your work itself will transmit your ideas and intentions, or are you satisfied with people bringing their own subjectivities and realities to your work?"

Miguel: "On the one hand we have our aesthetic relationship with the image. Even the image has its own cultural battles and aesthetic wars. As dictators of images that we are, establishing a gaze- our role is to charge the images with our spirit. Images are not only places where knowledge is inserted through graphic realities, but places for open opportunities. Images can be used not only in a contextual fact, but also to explain your own history, because finally it is a subjective production." (Robles & Koskinen).

In my own practice, I have often found myself reluctant to share every detail of my creative process, inspirations or motives. I have felt this closes off my work to exciting interpretations that instigate introspection and allows my art to touch many more people than an understanding of my biography and sources ever could. In fact, I do not like the associations of intentionalist interpretation and having the audience psychoanalyse me through the meaning behind my paintings. In addition, and in line with Wilde's ideas, I do not always know the sources of my own inspiration, or exactly what drives me to paint blue instead of red; sometimes it is aesthetic, sometimes contextual, sometimes it is simply my subconscious trying to make its mark on the canvas. Although I find myself mildly offended by interpretations that have gone off on a tangent and do not seem to reflect any of my expressed intentions and aesthetic components of my work, it does not change the meaning for me, and it does not change the physical elements of my work. What does is bad curation

However, the more I grow in my professional practice, and the more I research, the more careful I am about how 'bad curation' can affect the interpretation of my work, as it is much more prevalent and impactful than it appears to be. Obviously, curatorial arrangements and established discourse won't entirely control the audience's reactions, but it provides a framework for interpretation. So visual projects should really consider how this guidance is best provided. In the words of Foucault "pre-existing categories… must not be rejected definitively…but the tranquility with which they are accepted must be disturbed; we must show that they do not come about by themselves but are always the result of a construction the rules of which must be known and the justifications of which must be scrutinised." (Rose, 2016, p.235).

The argument 'everyone has their own mode of interpretation' obscures the real power relations of visual images and cultural production. The aim of my thesis was to assess the causes and impact of divergent audience interpretations, not only state their existence but unpack them so we might not continue to be blinded by them. I have tried to demonstrate that interpretation is not independent, accidental or automatic, but curated not only by space, display and discourse but by deeply ingrained artistic and epistemological ideologies. The contemporary art field needs changes in its hierarchical structure in order to promote projects and spaces that offer new perspectives that challenge or make better use of the author centric and intentionalist system, offering more visibility to those that history has pushed aside, or create fresh approaches to the way we form interpretation through anti-intentionalist approaches or new alternatives.

Appendices

Appendix A:

Sites and Modalities for the Interpretation of Visual Material. (Rose, 2016)

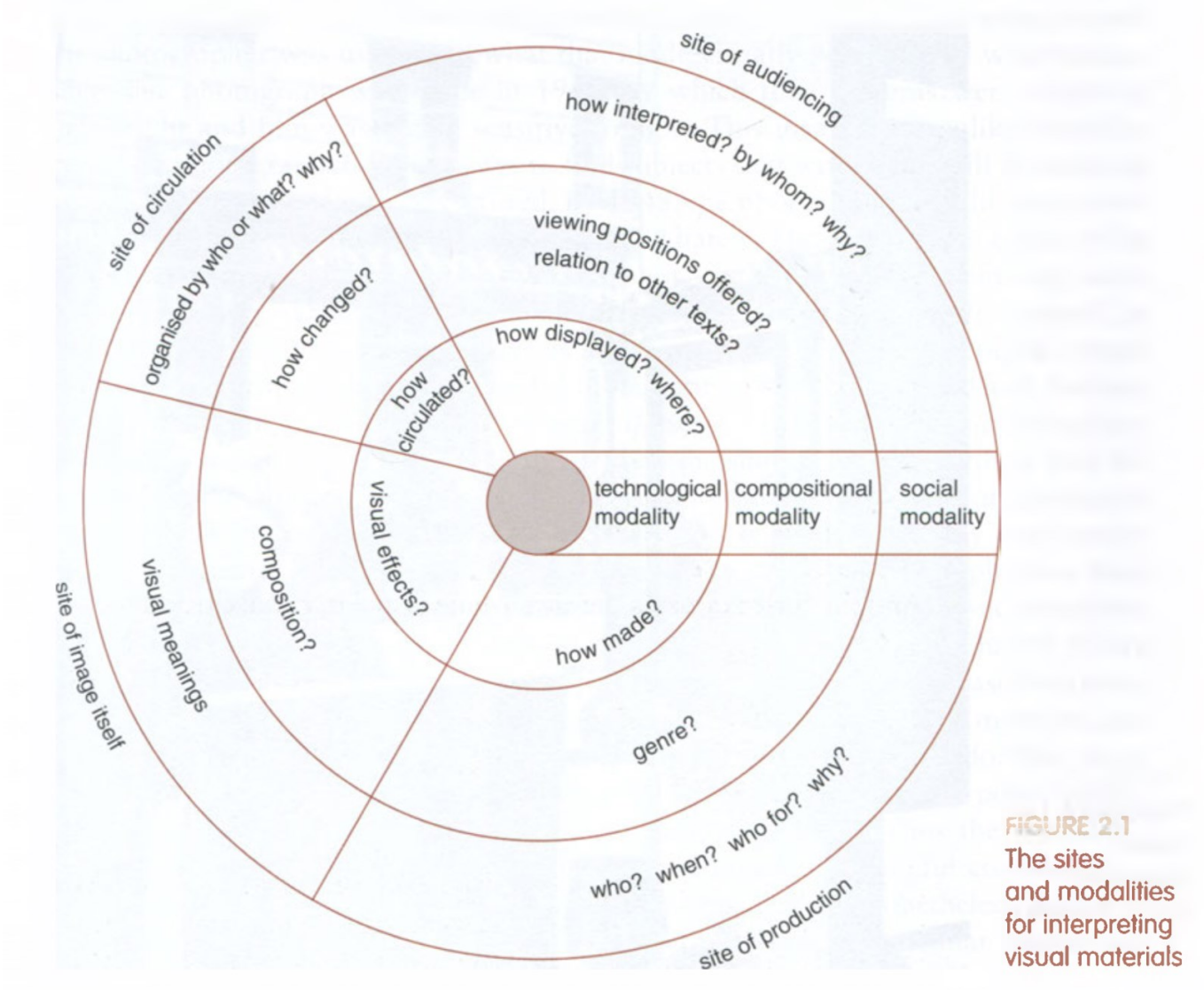
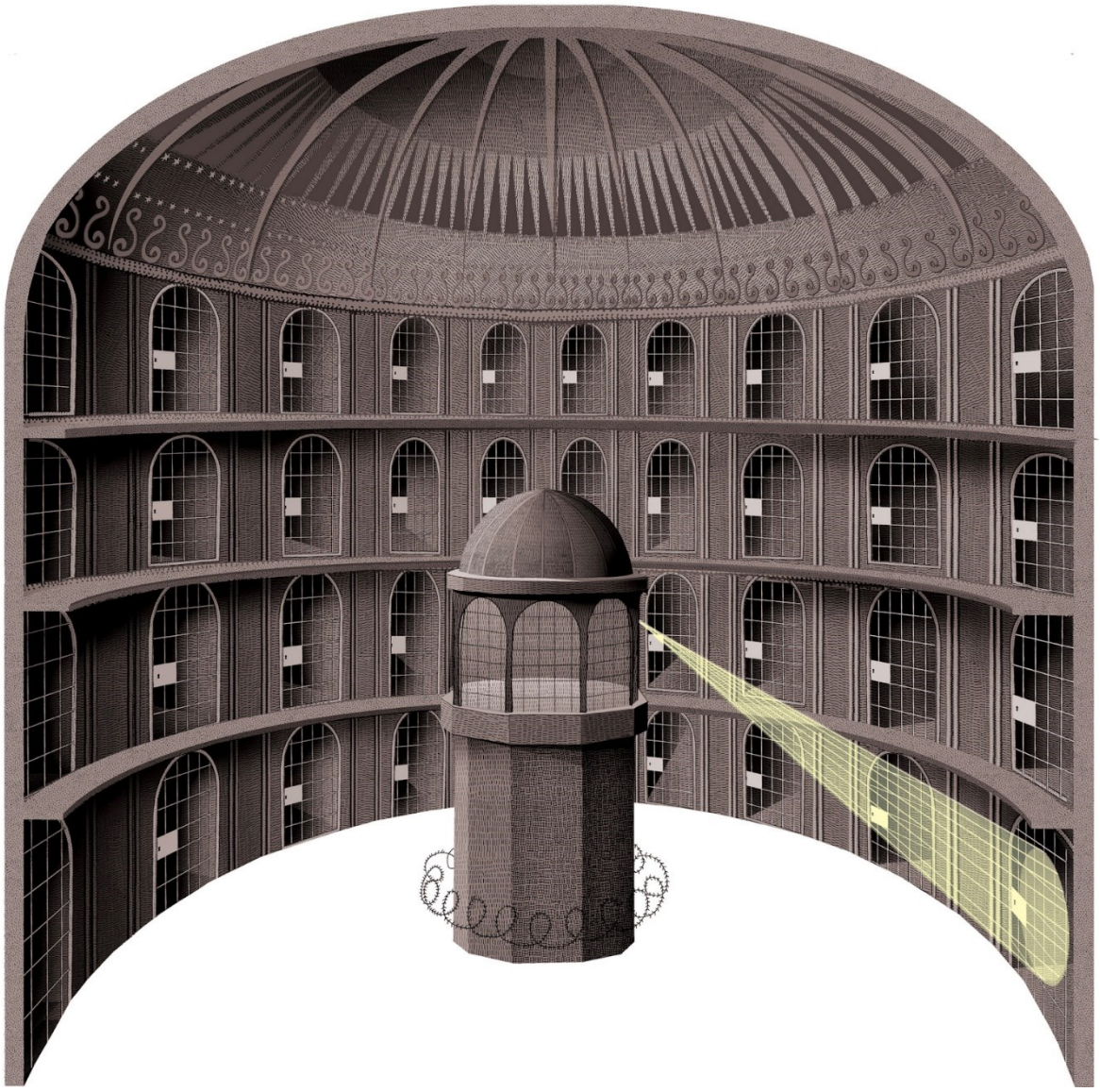


FIGURE 2.1
The sites and modalities for interpreting visual materials

Appendix B:

The panopticon (Shone, 2013)



Appendix C

Floor plan of the ground floor, exhibition spaces 1-5. (Tröndle et al, 2014).

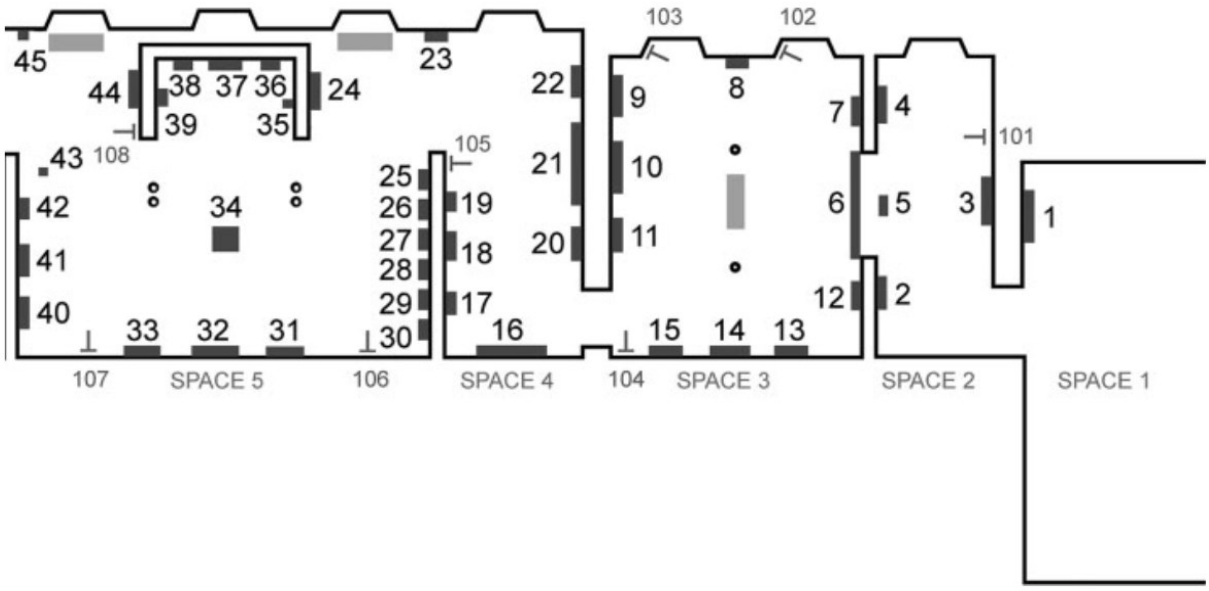
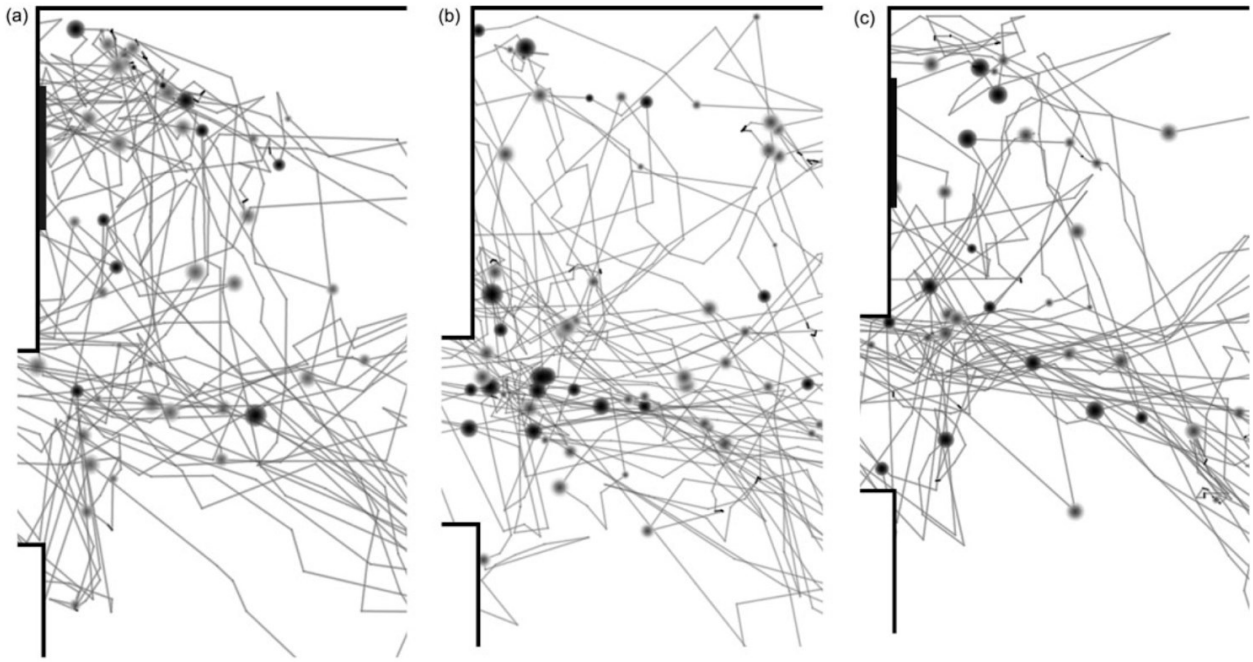


Figure 1. Floor plan of the ground floor, exhibition Spaces 1–5.

"The dark grey shapes on the floor plan represent the artworks (Place IDs 1–45), and the dark grey squares (Place IDs 34, 43) represent sculptures. Each exhibit position is allocated a number (Place ID). The three light grey squares are benches, and the six small black circles represent columns. The 'T' denotes text panels displaying biographical information about the museum collectors The artwork labels associated with single artworks (not shown) were mounted to the right of each artwork." (Tröndle et al, 2014).

Appendix D

Cartographies of Experiment: The density of the lines indicates the speed at which a visitor moved. The fainter the line, the faster the movement, the slower the darker. (Tröndle et al, 2014).



Appendix E

Complete Findings of Tröndle's Case Study

- (1) Viewing an artwork is strongly dependent on the environment in which it is positioned. It is only after a visitor has entered the actual exhibition space that the senses become engaged in a different way.

- (2) Secondly, the existence of an 'esthetic mode of viewing' has become evident, and, to our knowledge, this has been shown here empirically for the first time.

- (3) Thirdly, hanging order can exert considerable influence on the distribution of visitor attention, as demonstrated in our experiments. The artwork's attraction power derives more from the curatorial arrangement in which it is embedded than from any intrinsic property of the artwork itself.

- (4) Fourthly, highly complex networks of effects and force fields (via curatorial groupings, specific text–image arrangements, etc.) are formed within exhibitions; with every rearrangement, the composition and weighting of the space considerably redirected visitor attention.

- (5) The experiments revealed that the spatial structure and interferences between artworks have a strong impact on visitor behaviour and attention. Likewise, the way in which artworks are curated has a strong effect upon the visitor – but often this effect is an unintended one.

(Tröndle et al, 2014).

Appendix F

Experiment 4 Cartographies (Tröndle et al, 2014).

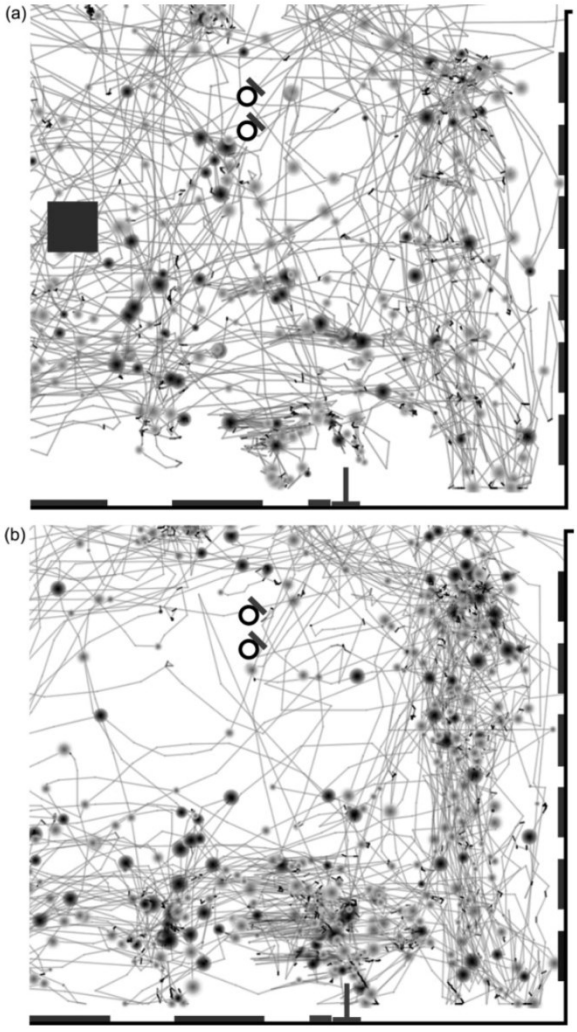


Figure 15. (a) Situation 0, with the sculpture *Entre Lys et Défense*, (b) Situation 1, empty, (c) Situation 2, the small sculpture *Schematic Relief*, (d) Situation 3, *Entre Lys et Défense*.

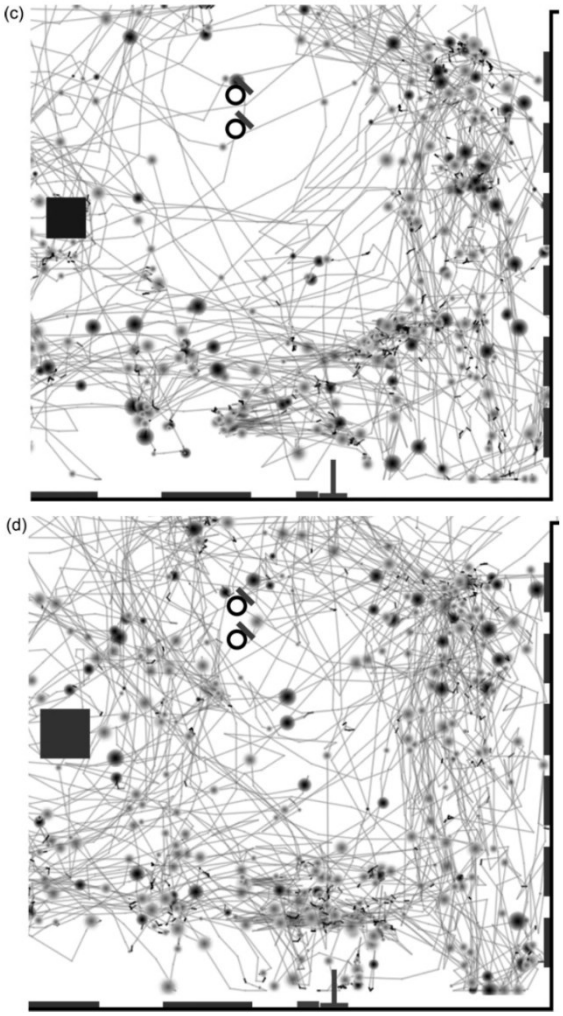


Figure 15. *Continued*

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List of Figures

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Alexandra Koskinen

♥