A Concept that invites a personal definition

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Rochester Institute of Technology

Untitled
or
A Concept That Invites a Personal Definition

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

By Christopher Kanyusik

July, 2004
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The artist is the person who builds the object; who builds the art. But if the art is to have true meaning, true substance, someone else or something else must invest it with power, someone other than the artist. The artist fashions an art object - like a shell, like a vessel. If that shell or that vessel is to be filled with anything of power, anything of substance, someone or something other than the artist must empower it. It is not the artist. It is that other person, those other people, that other thing, that are the true makers of the work of art.

Robert Kanyusik
My thesis work is the result of two interdependent explorations. The first is concerned with the use of the human figure as a sculptural device, and as such, a vehicle for information. This interest, however visually predominant in the physical actualization of my work, is preceded by my desire to more fully understand the concept and the components of art as pertaining to the human experience of creating as well as viewing art.

A complete and thorough exploration of these interests, if not impossible, is an endeavor to undertake over a lifetime rather than during the course of a few years. Even so, through this relatively brief investigation of my artistic concerns, my thesis has evolved into being primarily concentrated on researching the potentials of an ambiguous intent as it relates to the artist, the viewer, and the work of art itself. As such, my thesis work has come to address the ambiguity principle in art, specifically in relation to figurative sculpture.

This principle places emphasis on a provable characteristic of perception; that all configurations are liable to more than one interpretation. All configurations must therefore be regarded as always uncertain or indefinite in meaning. Inner significance, functional value or a purposeful pattern can only be discovered and developed in an artwork when its continual ambiguity is accepted. Overly predicative and verbally derived goals for a work of art can blind the artist to its potentials.

- Caldwell, Dake, Safly, Ulch  

Changes in the psychological impression generated by the same work of art occur, despite the fact that the form of the work remains the same. Once we establish the crux of the matter, so to speak, is not the content planned by the author but that attributed to it by the reader, it becomes obvious that the content of a work of art is a dependent and variable quantity, a function of the psyche of social man. The artist's achievement is not found in the minimum content that he intended to give his work. Rather, it is mirrored in the flexibility of the image, in the capacity of the internal form to inspire different contents.

- L.S. Vygotsky
Identifying and examining the role ambiguity plays in both the creation and viewing stages of the artistic process is to realize the importance, if not the necessity of multi-faceted artworks open to multi-dimensional interpretations. Far too often art is created and understood as a set and stagnant expression. Rigidly defined and direct links between the artist's prescribed intent and an object's meaning blatantly disregard the ever-evolving context of the relationship between the object and an individual viewer. Treated as a locked, literal, and lateral equation, the experience of art is unnecessarily subjected to reductionism: conceived, presented, analyzed, and perceived in its lowest common denominator. Pre-supplied with content, the recognition of a viewer's contribution to any variation of understanding beyond the artist's expressed intent is underdeveloped if not ignored, and any honest discourse about the relevance of and reaction to a work of art is impaired or disabled.

The idea that works of art are open to multiple meanings or interpretability is one that is consistently lacking and ignored. Rather the preferred route is to impose meanings, be they Marxist, feminist, or post modern and to attempt to fix a reading onto a work. This is by no means a way of accurately exploring the true nature of how the work functions.

Rob Bridgett

Ambiguity facilitates an object's or an idea's capability of being understood by multiple definitions. Arguably everything in existence contains an ambiguous quality to a certain degree. It is, however, the acceptance of and perhaps emphasis on this inherent ambiguity that transcends art from materiality, and distinguishes it from propaganda.

There is art - and there is advertising.

- Albert Sterner

When employed in regards to artistic intent, ambiguity allows an opportunity for the viewer to personalize interpretations or individualize meanings in an artwork by projecting into it their own experiences, preferences, or desired conclusions; to effectively fill-in the provided blanks.
Speech belongs half to the speaker, half to the listener.
Montaigne

The essential element of all art is that it leaves 'space' within which meaning occurs inside the individual. The opening up, deliberately, of that cognitive space for an audience will allow the work to take on a life of its own. The ambiguous space is a cognitive mirror, which will show something different to whoever looks into it.

Rob Bridgett

Each viewer brings his own emotions and perceptions to bear on the subject matter because it allows the audience to "fill in" the visual experience themselves. It's the ambiguity of all art, of a fine piece of music or a painting - you don't need written instructions by the composer or painter accompanying such works to "explain" them. "Explaining" them contributes nothing but a superficial "cultural" value, which has no value. Reactions to art are always different because they are always deeply personal.

- Stanley Kubrick

Viewing art in which the expressed intent is variable is not a passive activity through which the artist supplies all the effort. However, the assumption that an individual will be engaged by an artwork presupposes, for whatever reasons and by whatever means, the initiation of viewer interest. Defining a formula for exciting sufficient intrigue in an audience member (aside from recognizing the importance of the artist's preferences and presumptions) and determining the course and content of that viewer's interpretation, while possibly interesting and beneficial in many respects, are ultimately futile endeavors if certitude is the desired conclusion. If, how, why, to what degree, and to what end an artwork will dialogize with an observer are hypothetical and subjective, as unique and unpredictable as each individual viewer.

In art the search for a content which is collectively understandable is false; the content will always be individual.
- Piet Mondrian

Any artwork is on some level an exercise in communication. From the starkly minimal, intangibly conceptual, or irrationally abstract to the most blatant and literal
depiction of an object or a narrative, all artworks reveal something about their creator, their context, and their viewer. Employing an ambiguous intent as a means of provoking diverse viewer participation and a multi-dimensional interpretation of an artwork does not mean the work is indirect or unspecified to the point of not being pragmatic. On the contrary, ambiguity cannot exist as a component of a work of art without dependence on the physical, visual components decided upon by the artist to evoke a reaction of whatever kind. In short, for something to achieve ambiguity, it must first have a starting point, a catalyst through which to attain it.

I do not assert that there is no intention or meaning on the part of the artist, quite the contrary, it is just that the artist has chosen the degrees of which to employ those vague references rather than exact language to communicate his or her ideas.

Rob Bridgett 4
The human figure has never been forgotten in the arts.
- Germain Richier

After all that splattered paint, the acres of polythene, the not-so-daring prints, it's still there ... the human figure.
- Julian Freeman
Throughout human history, most likely beginning at the dawn of human expression and intercommunication, the human body has been utilized and understood as a narrative device. That is to say, the human body is always transmitting visual information in one form or another. Posture, cadence, race, gender, scars, deformities, clothing, hair style, jewelry / decoration, symmetry, proportion, etc., all are a means of revealing and receiving information, to a greater or lesser extent a narrative, about a human being.

But what figures these are, used to convey all types of messages.

Julian Freeman

For almost as long, this perception of the human body has been reflected and reinforced artistically. From prehistoric carvings to Greek and Roman statues, from the religious paintings of the Renaissance to the Socialist Realist propaganda of this past century, et al., the human figure in art has more often than not been employed to tell a story, to communicate a specific message, or as a metaphor for something outside of itself. By a broad and basic definition, the human body in its artistic representation has been assigned the role of a prop in a completed narrative, a vehicle for an agenda, a device for a desired outcome or interpretation, or a means to a preconceived end. This ascribed and accepted narrative quality of the human body in nature and reflectively in art exists to such a degree that the expectation of a clear and concise content derived from an examination of visual information is a reflexive, unconscious act of perception.

There is a trend today to de-emphasize the visible form that art takes with a corresponding elevation of the importance and appreciation of the message or idea (content) of the work of art.

- Rodney Chang
This phenomenon of observation and a conditioned anticipation of cognitive understanding, specifically in regards to the communicative nature of the human figure, allow ambiguity to be a viable and essential component of an artwork, facilitating engagement and evoking a response by the viewer.

In any situation where one of our senses is impaired the imagination has to fill in with explanations emanating from our own unconscious.

Rob Bridgett

The danger ... is that it can suffocate its subjects by its very ability to represent them: it doesn't possess the built in escape valves of ambiguity ... a virtue of sensory incompleteness - an incompleteness that engages the imagination of the viewer as compensation for what is only evoked by the artist.

- Walter Murch

My thesis work is a product of and a participant in the historical tradition of the human figure in sculptural art. There exists within our collective, common artistic evolution a connection and camaraderie spanning past and present through our chosen subject, and a tension between direct, reproductive modeling and abstract suggestion in our approach to and our depiction of the human body.

The ambiguity I strive to employ in my work is actualized by a combination of elements from these two extremes. On one side exists a literal depiction of a figure involved an explicit narrative, an illustration with little or no conceptual provocation. On the opposite end of this spectrum is a kind of work so intent on being ambiguous that it looses its connection to any possibility or suggestion of conceptual tangibility, thus becoming unclear, encoded, and confusing, ultimately resulting in viewer disengagement, exclusion, and irrelevance.

The search for an appropriate balance between trite banality and confusing, self-indulgent abstraction is the crux of my thesis investigations. Distortion, truncation, rough anatomical suggestion, and contextual experimentation counter anatomical accuracy,
articulation, and specific, direct animation. Surfaces (translucent bee's and encaustic waxes) allude to rather than mimic an organic epidermis, further bridging the rift between recognizable humanity and unknown purpose.

This thesis is the result of an investigation into the concept and the components of art through the use of the human figure in sculpture. The exploration has come to expose the necessity for an acknowledgement, appreciation, and application of an ambiguous intent (content, meaning, narrative, purpose, etc.) in my work.

Art bears greater power and relevance through ambiguity. It transcends commonality by remaining open, provocative, and to a certain degree unclear and unfinished, rather than presenting a banal package complete with an image and a corresponding narrative, leaving little or no room for viewer engagement.

*I think what one needs to do as an artist - as my kind of artist anyway, is to give things space. I see myself as a non-narrative artist. I'm not trying to say anything. In fact, I feel very passionately that I do not have anything to say as an artist - that the moment I do have something to say, the game is lost, the space closed up.*

- Anish Kapoor 13

*I don't want to avoid telling a story, but I want very, very much to do the thing that Valery said - to give the sensation without its conveyance. And the moment the story enters, the boredom comes upon you.*

- Francis Bacon 14

The act of creation for myself, as I imagine it is for many other artists, is and has always been a deeply personal endeavor. It is a necessary, intuitive act of expression rather than one of intellectual narrative and cognitive agenda. The impulses that I rely upon to actualize my work are so ingrained their origin and purpose elude me, as does the means and desire to define them. To ascribe an agenda onto my work, to describe my work in terms of a specific, desired interpretation, or to overlay my own understandings, conceptions, and conclusions onto my work beyond determining the work's physicality
seems to me to limit its breadth and scope, and stunt the work's potential. I am not interested in creating sophistic monologue. Rather, I am intrigued by participating in dialogical collaboration with individual viewers through a work of art as opposed to dictating a contrived, constant message onto the masses.

That the artist consciously has this or that objective in mind at the moment of creation and that the success of the work is somehow mortgaged to the extent to which it was followed through … would indeed be banal and reductive, robbing art (and for that matter ambiguity) of its organic quality, its ability to live and thrive independently of its originators' intentions.

David Cohen 15

The fiction of intentionality: the fiction that she knows what she intends, that she can say what she intends, and that she knows what she means by what she intends.

- James Elkins 16

The inclusion of ambiguity coupled with the implied or inherent content of the human figure allow my work to transcend the enclosed relationship between myself as the maker and it, as the object made. An unspecified, ambiguous intent assists the accessibility of an artwork by engaging and including the viewer; recognizing their distinctly personal interpretation as an indispensable component in the manifestation of art.

I love the sign of the hand and at the same time, it's as if what one is saying is that the art that one is reaching to - the artifice that one is reaching through - doesn't necessarily have to be a recorder of my personality. It's as if one's then talking about the notion that art might come to be beyond biography and come to be something that is reaching to a deeper part of our human presence.

Of course it's coming from one's psyche; one can do nothing but. There isn't anything else, but that one's psyche may be the beginning of the story and not the end of the story.

Anish Kapoor 14

Concluding this thesis in no way completes my investigation into art, the use of the human figure in art, the artistic process, and the ambiguity I have come to appreciate
as an element of each. The works I strive to create are objects that exist autonomous from whatever my conceptual intentions, works independent from being roadmaps of my psyche or illustrative advertisements for a particular result.

For myself, the primary concern in creating an artwork is not one of ownership or responsibility of content, but one of personal honesty, whatever it maybe and however it is found, expressed, and explored. That is not to say I am attempting to delineate a universal definition of what art should be, should look like, should evoke, should explore, explain, involve, or be used for. As each person's interpretation of an artwork differs, however subtle or minute the variations, so do our definitions of what art is.
The less accessible a work of art to the intellect, the greater it is.
- Goethe

The better hidden the author's views, the better for the work of art.
Engels
The nicest thing about anything is not knowing what it is.

- George Carlin
Combined with the preceding document, this thesis is culminated in conjunction with five sculptures exhibited in the Dyer Arts Center Gallery in the Lyndon B. Johnson building on the Rochester Institute of Technology campus from April 25 through May 24, 2003.

Pedestals
26x6x54 in.
Hand-built earthenware fired to cone 04 in reduction.

Torsos
38x38x38 in.
Hand-built earthenware painted with a thin layer of cone 04 white slip, fired to cone 04 in reduction, burnished post-firing with encaustic wax, and presented on a wooden pedestal.

Heads
48x12x25 in.
Hand-built earthenware painted with a thick application of cone 04 white slip, fired to cone 04 in reduction in close proximity to raw copper and black iron oxides for atmospheric effects, and presented on a wooden shelf.

Seated Figure
24x37x59 in.
Hand-built earthenware fired to cone 04 in reduction, surfaced post-firing with encaustic and unrefined bee's waxes, and presented on a wooden pedestal.

Couple
27x12x60 in.
Hand-built earthenware fired to cone 04 in reduction and surfaced post-firing with unrefined bee's wax.
Pedestals
Torsos
Heads
Technical Information

Earthenware Clay Body
Red Art - 25
Hawthorn Bond Fire-Clay - 30
Flint - 4
Custer Feldspar - 2
Talc - 2
Bentonite - .5
Red Iron Oxide - .5
Black Iron Oxide - 2
Fine Grog - 10
Medium Grog - 10
Course Grog - 10

Cone 04 White Slip
Neph Sy - 10
Frit 3124 - 28
Gersley Borate - 11
Flint - 20
Grolleg - 30

Unrefined bee's wax

*Encausticos* Encaustic Wax
Quotation Source Biographies

1. Robert Kanyusik (1947) is a Professor of Art at Nicolet College in Reinland, Wisconsin. Among his accomplishments he is recognized for creating the Wisconsin State Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial Statue.

2. Barbara Caldwell, Dennis Drake, Mat Safly, and Lisa Ulch are members of and contributors to The New Art Basics Project, a coalition of professional artists, teachers, and students coordinated from the College of Art and Design at Iowa State University.

3. Lev Semyonovich Vyotsky (1896 - 1934) was a major figure in post-revolutionary Soviet psychology best known for his studies concerning the role of social and cultural factors in the making of human consciousness.

4. Rob Bridgett is an accomplished British sound designer and composer who has written numerous articles and conducted several research projects on sound design for the moving image.

5. Albert Sterner (1863 - 1946) was a London born, German bred illustrator, draftsman, and academic artist. He established a studio in New York in 1885, and in 1918 began teaching at the Art Students League.

6. Michel Eyguem De Montaigne (1533 - 1592) was a French Renaissance theorist whose search for truth was focused on his own nature, habits, opinions, and experiences both public and private. His Essais (Essays) are his most widely known work.


8. Piet Mondrian (1872 - 1944) was a Dutch Neo-Plasticist painter whose non-objective, abstract style reduced the canvas/picture-plane into deliniated blocks of color and geometric shapes.

9. Germain Richier (1902 - 1959) was a French sculptor known for her powerfully expressionistic, fragmented representations of the human figure.

10. Julian Freeman is the coordinator for Historical and Contextual Studies at Eastbourne College of Arts and Technology, the author of many monographs and catalogs, and a regular contributor to several fine art journals.

11. Rodney Chang (1946 -) is an art theorist and cyber-artist who holds advanced degrees in art, psychology, zoology, and dentistry.
12. Walter Murch is an award winning motion picture sound editor whose resume includes *American Graffiti*, *The Godfather II*, and *Apocalypse Now*.

13. Anish Kapoor (1954 - ) is an internationally recognized sculptor born in Bombay, India who has lived and worked in London since the early 1970's.

14. Francis Bacon (1909 - 1992) was a self-taught Irish born, English painter whose works are notable for their satirical, horrifying, and hallucinatory treatment of the human body.

15. David Cohen (1963 - ) is a British art critic, curator, and independent scholar. He is currently gallery director at the New York Studio School.

16. James Elkins is a Professor in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

17. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749 - 1832) was a German poet, novelist, playwright, courtier, and natural philosopher most famous for his poetic two-part drama *Faust*.

18. Friedrich Engels (1820 - 1895) was a German social philosopher and revolutionary with whom Karl Marx founded modern Communism and Socialism.

19. George Carlin (1937 - ) is an American comedian, actor, and author whose humor combines acute social commentary and an unedited, unflinching worldview.
Bibliography


