Words and Works*

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The less there is to see, the more there is to say.

H. ROSENBERG

Kandinsky's watercolor of 1910, "First Abstract Painting," marks the baptism (if not the birth) of abstract art. Kandinsky also began to write an explanation and defense of his move to abstraction at the same time that he produced the work itself. It was an essay, entitled "Content and Form," for the catalogue of the Second International Salon at Odessa. Throughout the next year Kandinsky's art progressed from watercolor to abstract oil paintings, in the "Improvisations" series of 1911-12. Similarly, during the same period, he revised and extended this early essay into a book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, that was published in January of 1912. Clearly Kandinsky felt a need to put words of explanation around his works of art. He was not alone in this feeling, for most of the innovators (and disciples) of the abstract movement seem to have felt and expressed a similar need.[1] This need for words was quickly attended to by a growing body of interpreters, validators and prophets. Almost as fast as the abstract artists could produce their work, the art community provided journals devoted exclusively to the discussion of these abstract works : *De Stijl* (Leyden, 1917), *Vecht, Gegenstand, Objet* (Berlin, 1922); and *Axis* (London, 1935). For many of us the names of these journals ring the history of abstract art as surely as do the names of the major artists, and more surely than the names of even the major works of these artists. Thus it seems fair to say that abstract art grew up swimming in a sea of words.

The movement of abstract art, however, not unique in this respect. For it seems to me that twentieth century art as a whole is distinguished from its ancestors by the virtual torrent of words that sweeps it along, and by the extent to which these words function as explanation, interpretation and validation -- as opposed to the art-traditional style of commentary and criticism. It is instructive, for instance, to examine the representative sample of forty-two styles of twentieth century work catalogued in Jack Burnham's *The Structure of Art* and to find associated with each style its own school of words and word merchants.[2] The salient feature shared by these schools is

the feature already noted in connection with Kandinsky, the felt need to supplement the work of art with words.

This need, I think, creates a problem, formulated in an awkward but memorable way by the British painter and sometime art commentator Patrick Heron, who writes,

The fact that painting comes *before* criticism is a fact of which many are today increasingly unaware ... ...

Heron continues,

Art criticism used to be an...activiy...which took took place after the event; it was essentially retrospective by nature... By contrast painting used to be the result of an essentially non-verbal consciousness or perception ... All this is changed. .. Increasingly, we *see* what we read, we *paint* what we are told that we see..... [3]

The twentieth century phenomenon of words surrounding works points to a deep contradiction in beliefs about art, a contradiction shared equally by artists and audience, and that shapes the art-world in which we all live. The contradiction is inherent in Heron's reference to "non-verbal consciousness." For Heron reminds us that, as we usually think of it, the creative work of the artist is intuitive, non-verbal and (essentially) not conceptual -- at least not in the way that the work of the logician or philosopher *is* conceptual. Art trades in images and forms rather than concepts and words. To put it in a trendy way, art is the work of the right-brain, not the left. If it succeeds, then art expands the capacity of the right brain to do its own particular work. You might say that successful art expands our consciousness, or our capacity to perceive the world or to experience it. One would not say that art itself articulates or enables us better to put into words (or to conceptualize) what that experience is like. If art is a mode of communication at all, then one would say that it communicates with us directly, or in its own terms but, in any case, not by means of a verbal or conceptual medium.

These are commonplace ideas in the world of art, ideas shared by both producers and consumers of art. I would not claim that everyone believes them, but rather that they constitute a stereotype for artistic endeavor and appreciation. As such they form an important conception of art, a conception that influences the art experience alike of both the believer in the conception and the non-believer. Let me encapsulate this important stereotype by means of the following formula,

ART = Work-Without-Words.

This stereotype, however, seems to run at cross purposes with the fact already noted, that the activity of the artist, and the fruits of that activity, seem increasingly to call for a surrounding of words : verbal elucidation, verbal description. verbal commentary, verbal criticism, verbal interpretation, verbal explanation, verbal validation, .. Often enough, these days, we get the beginnings of this word-flood right at the exhibition, on a looped tape that repeats the word-setting over and over, and then over again. Thus art in this century seems to fit another stereotype, according to the formula,

ART = Work-Needing-Words.

How are we to reconcile there stereotypes ? How are we to explain, or perhaps explain away, the apparent contradiction ?

Buried in the massive literature on the contemporary arts there are several attempts to explain the phenomenon of words, and I think three of these explanations are worth some serious attention.

The first idea is a simple and interesting one, expressed in some of the essays of Harold Rosenberg. Rosenberg was the theoretician -- the primary interpreter and validator -- of American "action painting" in the 1950's. (He coined the term "action painting" to refer to what the Europeans still like to call "painting by gesture".) In essays from that period he attacks the humanist as a reactionary for whom, in Rosenberg's beautiful phrase, "The thinking of painters [as expressed in their writing] only adds verbal insult to retinal injury."[4] Rosenberg then procedes to defend the "verbal insult" in the following way. He writes,

The intellectualistic character of all current audiences is an effect of the steady transformation of the whole populace into professionals and semi-professionals the essential mark of a profession is its evolution of a unique language or jargon into which it translates its subject matter and in which its methods, purposes and relations to other arts and sciences are formulated. The more incomprehensible this lingo is to outsiders, the more thoroughly it identifies the profession as such and elevates it out of the reach of mere amateurs and craftsmen.[5]

Thus Rosenberg sees in the phenomenon of art as work-needing-words an aspect of the twentieth century tendency towards professionalization. For professionalization, he thinks, requires a specialized jargon. It is rather like the formation of a street-gang, with its own secret codes and pass-words.

One can hardly quarrel with Rosenberg's perception of the general tendency towards professionalization in the arts. Not long ago, for example, I attended an arts conference featuring several well-known Chicago and New York artists, During the conference the topics of greatest interest tuned out to be those concerned with retirement benefits and health insurance for artists. Except for the general style of dress (namely, in the official decorated-jeans uniform of the art-gang) it could well have been a meeting of the subcommittee on insurance of the American Medical Association. Thele is no doubt about it, Rosenberg is correct in seeing an increasing professionalization among artists.

But does this really get to the heart of the problem ? For the felt need to interpret, explain and validate one's art in words seems to be a need felt by artists to communicate outside the confines of their own heads or those of their special art-cronies; outside, even, their comfortable niche in the local art-world. It is a need whose expression is addressed to public audiences at public exhibitions, it is proclaimed (as first with Kandinsky) in general catalogues of their works, and published (and projected) in journals and books (and videotapes) disseminated throughout the world. To be sure, artists sometimes write just for themselves and the members of their gang. And of course the gang instinct is there, and is sometimes expressed in a ritualized jargon. But this gang phenomenon, I think, is only a small part of the larger phenomenon of words. It touches not at all on the felt need for public verbal expression as the dominant background setting for one's work.

Rosenberg's suggestion about professionalization, despite its simplicity and aptness as a commentary on the current art scene, does not seem adequate as an explanation of art as work-needing-words. It is as though the A.M.A, as part of a public education compaign, issued a series of pamphlets on cancer that were written entirely in medical Latin. Suppose, then, that a knowledgeable commentator on the medical scene tried to explain this to us as follows. "Look, these doctors -- you know -- these guys are professionals. They have their own lingo." It won't do. The word-neediness of contemporary art is something more than the need of the neighborhood art gang for a secret password. We must look beyond the phenomenon of professionalization in the arts to account for it.

In the article by Patick Heron, the one with the pungent reminder that painting comes before criticism, there is another suggestion for the word-neediness of the current art scene. This second suggestion is also

connected with significant features of twentieth century culture. Heron focuses the idea that much of our cultural life is dominated by the medis. He writes,

"Television,films, glossy reproductions can circle the globe in a trice -- arriving on the other side of the world months and even years before those cumbersome objects, the painted canvases on their stretchers, can catch up with the distorted image of themselves which 'the media' have distributed in advance.[6]"

What Heron perceives is what I would describe as a rather nasty, two stage acculturation process, the first stage we are presented with a reproduction of the work of art, on film or television, or in a picturecatalogue or book. This accustoms us, right off, to experiencing the work of art itself through the medium of something else -- the reproduction. This stage is naturally and appropriately accompanied by descriptions in words of the reproduction and, perhaps, of how it compares with the original. In the second stage (as it were), the reproduction is removed and, habituated as we are to a surrounding medium for experiencing the work, we naturally look to the word descriptions themselves to help us. Thus, we come to rely on words and eventually, as in the stereotypical formula, to feel that the work *needs* the help of words.

Let me refer to this two-stage process as the word-addiction model. In this model the media play the role of dealers who first get us hooked and then, when we really feel that need for words, reap the profits.[7] In this word addiction model, as in the previous suggestion about professionalization, I think we can recognize a significant truth about the arts in contemporary life. We are all over-exposed to mass media and the media themselves are over-laden with words. Moreover the reliance on words is a readily observable phenomenon. If you hesitate to acknowledge it in yourself, then just stand back from any exhibit and notice the reflex behaviour of the audience who almost invariably *first* read the posted text and only afterwards view the displayed work. Look about you during a concert and notice how many people in the audience are actually reaping the program notes while (one assumes) listening to the performance, and how many more anxiously check and re-check the program, I suppose, so as to confirm what they are hearing.[8]

The word-addiction model certainly addresses such phenomena and, moreover, goes some way to getting at the felt *need* for words. But it is

not, I think, adequate as an explanation. From the fact of a very widespread word addiction it does not follow that the process leading to the addiction is rooted in the media in the way that the model requires. For instance, one could not plausibly suggest that Kandinsky's need to surround his abstract paintings with words was a need derived from a media-induced habit of viewing reproductions-cum-text. For one thing, even if Kandinsky had such a habit (which is unlikely, although as a law professor he may well have become addicted to words and, as a poet, he showed his love for them) we must wonder why the need for words was not expressed earlier. For nearly a decade prior to 1910 Kandinsky was a painter, experimenting with color, light and form in numerous quasi-representational paintings. But in this period there is no exercise of words, no expression of the need to set his paintinge off with words. It is only with his flight from the object that Kandinsky falls prey to the word-need. The addiction model, for all its aptness as a comment on the influence of the media, seems insensitive to such nuances of word-neediness in the arts. Let me expand on this idea

I imagine myself in a gallery (or studio) in front of a large, painted canvass. The paint is thick, heavily laid on with brush and palette knife. The strokes overlap, fusing linework and brushwork, Contours, figures -- even backgrounds -- are vague. The colors dominate, especially the reds. The painting comes with a displayed text which reads.

Ambiguous space...the dislocated space in which the flux of modern life takes place. Tension then arises out of the difficulty in determining where the figure is placed as it emerges from its chaotic enviroment to assume its own identity.[9]

I can readily imagine looking closely at the painting, being puzzled by it, trying hard but not really knowing what to make of it, and feeling acutely the need for the written text to help me out (a need probably destined for frustration, in this instance). In this imaginery ep iode, I think we can see the idea of addiction. I *feel* the need for words. I *can't get on* without them. But now change the picture and imagine the scene differently. In this second vignette I enter a small gallery and my eye is immediately caught by a deeply vibrant orange rectangle, offcentered on a large cannvass and set in a smll parade of geometrical designs. I drink in the color and gradually feel myself fused with the plane of the painting, marching in tune with the surrounding forms. The experience of the painting leaves me full inside, and genuinely moved. After a while I think to glance at the title ("Rectangle, Number Three"), and I wonder a bit about the paintier and what she was

trying to do. In this second story there *is* on felt need for words, nor has the artist bothered to express any.

These imaginary tales show us how the audience may experience the need for words selectively : sometimes acutely, sometimes not at all. They complement the earlier references to Kandinsky, which show the same selectivity of needs on the part of the artist No genuine addiction to words would show up this way. For were we really addicted to taking art with words, then we could hardly take it straight, unless already fixed. Moreover the media do not seem to fit in any plausible way with the variations and selectivity of the need. I he word-addiction model, therefore, can not adequately account for these important features of our wordneediness.

The explanations proffered so far attend to certain aspects of the phenomenon of words : a secret art-jargon fits nicely with professionalization, and the general felt need for words goes along with an addictive acculturation to the media. But other, and central, aspects of the phenomenon remain. In particular the public surrounding of works with words and the variability in the need for such word settings have not yet been properly addressed. I believe that getting at such factors requires that we move from external-based accounts (explanations rooted primarily in features of general culture) to aecounts of a more internal sort, ones that draw their insight from art-specific conceptions.

The third account I want to consider here is just of this internalistt variety. This account is rooted in reflections about the pace of change in this century, but more specifically about the pace of change in the arts. It directs our attention to features such as these : that new artistic abstractions are derived from old abstractions at a dizzying rate; that current thought moves away from the concept of the art-work as an object to the idea of the work as a process, or event or even an experience; the divide between art and reality that made room for the older mimetic conception of art has given way to a mere gap in which the arts often conceive of themselves as residing; that the art-world promotes innovation almost -- it seems -- for the sake of innovation.

The following bewildering array of contemporary works, assembled (for purposes of ridicule and chastisement) by Edward Cone, shows the results of such rapid change.

At the Venice Biennale of 1972 a "keynote" exhibit consisted of ten thousend hatching butterfly eggs in the Piazza San Marco. ... Another

exhibit at the same show included, in addition to a dancing couple (live) and some skeletons (dead), an apparent Mongoloid sitting in a chair. ... In the same year, Christo succeeded in stretching an orange curtain across Rifle Gap, Colorado. Since then he has covered the cave at Kings Beach, Rhode Island with 150,000 square feet of polypropylene fabric.

John Cage, the composer who is perhaps best known for his four minutes and thirty - three seconds of silence, has produced other music by recording random sounds in New York City. ...Douglas Huebler's "Location Piece No. 7" depends on the behavior of snow, which is allowed to melt and then to evaporate. ... some work of Jack Reynolds ... included, among other oddities, one box of live chicks and dead cornstalks, and another full of live mice with grain bags.

Some art is achieved through personal mutilation. Chris Burden, possibly the most accomplished member of this school, on one occasion had himself shot in the arm, on another he was crucified on a Volkswagon. Vito Acconci gave his own body a thorough biting.

Only last year the Tate Gallery raised a storm by the purchase of a work by Carl Andre. It consisted of 120 standard bricks, arranged, according to in tructions, in a rectangle ten bricks long by six wide by two high. Cone's article is entitled "One Hundred Metronomes," after Ligeti's "Poeme Symphonique" in which one hundred metronomes are wound up and then set to tick away until they all run down.

One might well expect that the rapid change in the art-world that allows latitude for such a puzzling and complex variety of works would need to foster reliance on some relatively stable medium in whch to interpret, explain and validate the new art; thus, one might come to expect the reliance on the medium of language itself. Jack Burnham has recourse to the writings of the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss on just this theme. In "The Raw And The Cooked," Levi-Strauss writes,

Does not this dependence on a different idiom [ie., on words] betray a feeling of anxiety that, in the absence of a fairly apportioned code, complex messages may be inadequately received by those people to whom they have, after all, to be addressed ? Once language has been *unhinged*, it inevitably tends to fall apart ... "[11]

Burnham endorses this view, remarking that words supply what the work itself lacks. And Burnham joins Levi-Strauss and Cone in wagging a

critical finger at modern art for having become unhinged from its legitimating arthistorical foundation. I do not wish to endorse this traditionalist criticism of modern art, but I do believe that the idea here involves a significant and widely held conception of art, and one especially relevant to the phenomena of word-neediness.

The idea is that a work of art contains a message written in a special code. One then tries to promote this idea along the following lines. The pace of change in the arts, one suggests, has been so rapid that virtually no-one can keep up with the newly invented codes. So words have to surround the work in order to do the job of decoding what used to be done by conventions learned from the history of art itself. Thus not only does art need the help of words but it needs that help in public, whese it is shown, and selectively so. For, artforms closer to the historically understood codes will require words to direct the decoding less than do those artforms representing a sharper break with the already assimilated traditions. Thus the idea that a work of art contains a coded message seems to promise an account for just those aspects of the phenomenon of words that we identified as requiring explanation.

According to this idea of a code, when we are puzzled about a work we are puzzled about the coded message. We might be asking, "what does this work say; what is it about ?" How are the surrounding words supposed to help here ? I think one can best answer that by illustration.

Suppose we are examining two works, each consists of a closed glass tube mounted horizontally on an apparatus that keeps the tube in motion. Each tube is filled with a sticky blue liquid that wriggles and squirms as the tube moves. How are we to teli what these works say ? Indeed how are we to tell whether these are two distinct works at all, rather than two examples of the same generic type--like two lithographs--or one work and one copy ?) One way might be this. Suppose each work comes with a written text attached to it. One text reads, "Blues got me down." The other text is a bit of dirty dialogue from the film "Deep Throat." In such a situation it seems clear enough that we really do need help to understand the works, and that the surrounding words actually help us. In some sense, it is perfectly obvious how the words help, although to articulate the "how" itself in words is not easy to do. Fortunately, I need not even try to do it, for once we have grasped the illustration we already have all there is to get.

What we have, in the example, is some understanding of the works, an understanding to which we have been led by the accompanying text. We might, for instance, now be inclined to say that one work makes a statement about feeling blue, whereeas the other work says something about sex. (Given the text, of course, there are also other statements we might attribute to the work, other things for it to be about.) We might also say that now, having read the accompanying texts, we ve got the message. So we can say that these works are different because one is about the blues, the other about sex. But I hope we would recognize in our inclination to talk this way (ie , in terms of messages, statements, codes, etc.) the utilization of a useful but limited metaphor. A moving glass tube filled with a blue viscous substance does not contain any coded message (unless, perhaps, a secret agent hid one there). It is a mute object and, literally, makes no statement whatsoever. Nor does it refer; it is not "about" anything at all (not even about "art itself", as some would have it). The idea that a work of art literally contains a coded message (presumably put there intentionally by the artist and to be decoded by the audience) is a mistaken idea.

It is a deep mistake, commonly made and widely influential. It colors and distorts our understanding of art. Whole interpretive repertoire's have been built in this mistaken way. Listen, for example, to John Berger on Magritte,

Magritte accepts and uses a certain language of paintin . The languag is over 500 years old ... It assumes that the truth is to be found in appearances ... It assumes continuity in time as also in space. It is a language which treats, most naturally, of *objects* ... It is capable of expressing spiritual experience ... I cannot trace here the transformation which this language underwent during five centuries ...

Magritte never questioned the aptness of this language for expressing what he had to say. Thus there is no obscurity in his art. Everything is plainly readable. .. (I use the word *readable* metaphorically : His language is visual, not literary, though being a language, it signifies something other than itslf.)[12]

Dispite his disclaimer, it is clear that Berger takes the metaphor literally, and so uses it throughout his interpretive writings. A recent pictrorial introduction to the aesthetics of photography, described by The Sunday Times reviewer (quoted on the back cover) as "... the most ..

informative visual essay on the nature and concerns of photography to be seen in Britain for many a decade " is entitled, *Reading Photography*. The lead essay begins, "This show is an attempt to provide a basic working vocabulary for reading photographs," and the succeeding essays go on in detail about the vocabulary and grammar of a photograph.[13] The same idea of reading a photograph is exploited in nearly every critical review.[14] And even Susan Sontag,[15] whose wittgensteinian heritaeg ought to have helped her avoid the temptation, describes a photograph as a quotation, and a book of photographs as a book of quotations (p. 71). In discussing the Godard and Gorin film, *A Letter to Jane*, Sontag tells us "The film is also a model lesson on how to read any photograph, how to decipher the un-innocent nature of a photograph's framing, angle and focus," (p. 108) Sontag seems to hesitate just a moment before entirely swallowing the secret coded message idea when she writes in an iffy way, "If photographs are messages, the message is both transparent and mysterious." But then she immediately takes the bait by quoting approvingly from Diane Arbus, "A photograph is a secret about a secret." (p 111). Not only commentators, interpreters and critics, but the professional art historians as well have been absorbed with the language/message metaphor. It is, for example, the essential core around which Jack Burnham tries to build his whole structuralist history.[16] And, finally, as good and perceptive a philosopher of art as Arthur Danto cannot pull himself away from the idea of art as a language, having semantic and representative functions, and being (semantically) "about" something (in the modern period, usually about art itself.)[17]

If ever there were a case of language becoming unhinged, having lost touch with its roots, it is here in the description of artworks as being written in a certain language, as containing a message, as requiring decoding, as making a statement, as being about this (or that). Useful metaphors, having to do with the syntax and semantics of language, have become detached from the contexts in which they function metaphorically and taken instead as literal insights about the very nature of art itself, the nuclei of interpretive, historical and philosophical theories of art and artworks. It is exactly as though at a concert one listener remarked of the music, "That was very moving.", and a companion responded first by asking about the speed and directon of the motion, and then went on to offer a theory involving musical masses whose forces and mutual interactions gave rise to the resultant vectors of motion.

Indeed, the idea that a work of art contains a message to be decoded becomes especially forced and misleading if we apply it to music, and if we keep in mind the actual experience of listening to a piece of music.[18] Do we get, or even try to get any message in listening to music ? What, after all does Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra* say ? How do we tell ? How many bars are required for which part of the message ? Is it true, what the concerto says ? Is the truth (or falsity) relevant to the value of the music ? Could Bartok have coded the message incorrectly ? Would it improve the concerto if the code were improved ? Etc. Of course, every metaphor can be stretched. And those still pulled by the metaphor of coded language could no doubt produce answers to even such silly questions. (Would there be any common basis for the answers ? [19]) But for the rest of us, I hope, here surely the resources of the metaphor come to end.

The metaphor of an artwork encapsulating a coded message leads to a mistaken conception of art. The mistake, as I have emphasized is an influential one and clearly the attraction of the metaphor, full blown, is powerful. Before we can get on with understanding the phenomenon of words in contempory art, I think we must get at the source of the power. It comes, I think, from the most common ideas of art as a form of expression and communication. These ideas, in turn, derive from our belief that a work of art is something meaningful to be *understood* The connections here are put as boldly as one could wish by John Berger, quoting Susan Sontag.

Meaning is the result of understanding functions. "And functioning takes place in time, ... Only that which narrates can make us understand."[20] These brief remarks suggest the following theory.[21] To understand a work of art is to grasp its meaning (or meanings if more than one). But, since understanding is only brought about by a narrative, grasping the meaning of a work of art must be identified with getting the narrative told by the work. (Thus we arrive at the "reading the painting/photograph" idiom.) In turn, the narrative told by the work is what it expresses and, hopefully, communicates. This is the (coded) message. Thus, works of art express and communicate messages; these messages convey the meaning of the work, and understanding the work is just getting the message. It is this chain of connections, bound together by the view that only narratives lead to understanding, which is the source of the language metaphor But not only is every link in this chain weak, the view that attaches understanding to narrative is a complete distortion of how understanding is achieved.

I do not want to take up the question of whether (or to what extent) works of art express and communicate. It will be sufficient to offer a suggestion and a reminder. The suggestion is that even to the extent to which a work does express or communicate there may be no object--no "thing"--that one can identify as what is expressed, or what is communicated. "That's an expressive work; it really speaks (communicates) to me." Such an assertion may well be like, "It moves me. It fascinates me. I like it." So I suggest.[22] The reminder is just to keep in mind that part of what the history of modern art calls into question is precisely whether art does (or can) serve the semantic functions of expression and communication. So the requirement that a work express or communicate a hidden message begs a central issue in contemporary art, as well as being insensitive to the nuances of the subject. When asked "If you cast a beer can, is that a comment ?", Jasper Johns replied, sincerely and with genuine perplexity, "On what ?".[23]

I do want to address the idea that only narratives lead to understanding. This idea is at best only a partial truth even in its proper domain, that of language. For even there, to understand an assertion, comment or question need not depend on a *narrative* context. An exchange of greetings ("How are you ?" "Fine, and you ?") is an intelligible self-contained whole. Its intelligibility, of course, depends on the entire nexus of language use. But no special narrative or "message" makes for the mutual understanding in such an exchange. There are, to be sure, other kinds of cases. In some cases we fail to understand what is being said until a larger context is set out or an explanatory story is told. "The Absolute multiplies furiously" can be understood in a narrative where "The Absolute" is the name of a rabbit. Sometimes understanding in a work of art is somewhat like this. For example in the bottom right hand corner of one of Rauschenberg's earliest exhibited works ("White Painting With Numbers") there is a five-pointed red star. Calvin Tomkins tells the story of Rauschenberg's student life at the time of the painting and of how "he had just learned that art galleries used little red stars to indicate that a work has been sold."[24] This narrative certainly helps us understand the presence of the star. The presence of other elements in the painting might well be understood with the help of similar narratives. But what we call "understanding the painting" is not something to be achieved by understanding the presence of all these different parts. It is, rather, more like understanding a greeting, or a smile, or an embrace. It is closer to that special sympathy between people that we call "understanding at first sight" than it is to the work done by a telegrapher

in decoding a message. When we come to understand a work of art we enter into a significant and meaningful relationship with the work. The work, we can say, becomes significant or meaningful for us. But such a relationship need not, and generally does not involve the transmission of any message (or the like). The central mistake is the crude idea that to be significant is to signify something, that to be meaningful is (literally) to possess as an object (like a message) some thing which is a "maning".[25]

To understand a work of art (in the sense of "understanding" that concerns us here) is just *to be in touch with the work*. It is as simple as simple as that, and involves no messages coded or otherwise. It is also as complicated as that, involving the idea of a significant integration of the work into one's life. The idea of *being in touch with*, suggests that the work affects us and in a causal way -- like being pulled or pushed, in general, being moved. The determinants of that causal interaction, (the determinants, that is, of how one experiences the work) are exceedingly complex. But this much is clear enough, they involve contextual features concerning the properties of the work, its physical setting and its cultural (historical, intellectual, etc.) surroundings. They also involve corresponding contextual features concerning us, the audience. Such a causal interaction meniated by contextual features at both the cause (work) end and the effect (audience) end is what understanding (when it occurs) amounts to. This is how a work speaks to us and expresses itself. This is what is to grasp the meaning of a work. It is to be on the "effect" end of such a causa relationship, to be touched by the work.

If we replace the mistaken picture of an encoded message by the idea of a contextually mediated causal connection, then I think we are finally in a position to understsnd the felt need for word-settings throughout the development of art in the modern era. Go back to my simple illustration of the moving liquid-filled tubes. What the words do is to provide a context to connect the viewer to the work. They address the question, "How am I to respond to what is is in front of me?" They do not enable the work to convey any special message, nor do they determine any special response on our part. But, by narrowing down the plethora of possible modes of response, they provide just enough guidance for us to have an opportunity to experience the work as significant. The text directs us, for example, to think of sex (in one case) or to attend to moods (in the other) and the plus the details of the work, plus the setting, does the job. The words, to put it somewhat pretentiously, make it possible for us to understand the works.[26]

Thus it is not that the pace of change in the modern period has altered the codes by which we decipher the messages of modern art. It is, rather, that the opening up of art along the lines of "anything goes" has utterly removed the traditional guidelines for how to interact significantly with a work. The reliable contextual features of artistic production, of presentation and of audience participation, contexts that had been set by traditional practices, have been winnowed down to a vanishing point. This has left a gap : the need for new contexts rich enough to facilitate connections between the work and the audience. As in the operation of a conservation law in physics, something had to flow in to fill the gap. We know the result, a flood of words.

I think we can see how nicely this explanation fits the phenomena if we attend to the character of the words that flow around the artistic works. Recalling her relationship with Robert Rauschenberg, Rachel Rosenthal reports,

And when he'd talk about his work example at the Egan Gallery during his show there, it had such conviction and strength and total involvement. He was such a master of theater ! I saw him open people's eyes to his work with words I knew they didn't understand.[27]

With words I knew they didn't understand ! Of course, the use of words that are not understood, the descriptions and commentary on art in a language that often crosses the limits of intelligibility is the most conspicuous feature (and to some the most disturbing one) of the world of art-words. But why not ? If, as I have suggested, the words surrounding works of art are there to provide part of the context facilitating responses to the works, then it is not necessary that the words serve their usual, cognitive functions. They need not covey ideas, or codes, or even coherent patterns of thoughts. Moods, feelings, associations and the like will do. Attend to the nonsense notes that Duchamp produced to accompany his infamous "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even." Duchamp speaks of of the Bride as "a sort of automobile with quite feeble cylinders" having "desiregears" fuelled by "love-gasoline." He rattles on about "oscillating density", "emancipated metat", "timid power", "draft pistons", etc. This is language on holiday, creating word -music and theater, designed to help put us in touch with the work. Of course, I must quickly say that much of the wordiness of the current art scene seems to me to fail. Its pretentions create a cacaphony that actually interferes with our connecting to the work. The manufacturers

of this noise are to be criticized (and weeded out) on just these grounds : they hinder rather than help; their words close our eyes to art rather than open them. Nevertheless, the conception of the experience of art as a contextually mediated causal relationship between the work and the audience provides the basis, I think, for understanding the wordneediness of contemporary art, and the significant features of the sea of words that surround the works.

I began this essay by suggesting a possible contradiction between the stereotype of art as work-without-words and the current sense of art as work-needing-words. I think we can now see the obvious resolution; it is the causal conception according to which art is *work-needing-context*. In a period in which traditional contexts change only slowly, it is easy and natural not to notice the essential role of contextual features in our experience of art; thus the original stereotype. In a period of more rapid change, the reliance on context becomes apparent. Modern art forces our attention to context. That is one of the great "discoveries" of our times. When the contexts are heavily laden with words, we get the second formula. But we must not be fooled by the use of words, for the role they play is not specifically cognitive so much as, more generally, connective. And this fact raises an interesting question and a fresh possibility. Why words ? Why not try to connect the work to the audience in non - verbal, more gestural, ways ? Here are new dimensions in which, I think, contemporary art is already moving.

Notes and References

*. The epigraph is taken from Harold Rosenberg; "Defining Art" in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art* (E.P. Dutton, New York, 1968) p. 306. The present essay grew out of a lecture in a series "The arts in a climate of change" organized by Helens S. Fine, sponsored by The Chicago Consortium of Colleges and The Museum of Contemporary, Art, and held in the Chicago Filmmakers and A.R.C. facilities during the spring of 1978. My deep thanks to Helene who not only encouraged my participation in the series but, over the years, helped tutor my understanding of contemporary art. Thanks too to Marty Hurtig whose enthusiasm and resources, as an artist and teacher, were an important source of stimulation. Thanks, finally, to Doug Stalker and to the many students whose lively response to the videotape of that talk have persuaded me to this present effort.

1. Almost any good study of the abstract movement will document this phenomenon of works surrounded by words, but usually by inadvertance; ie., without noticing that this feature of the movement itself needs to be understood. A good study, and a good example of this inadvertent documentation, is Dora Vallier, *Abstract Art*, trans. J. Griffin, (The Orion Press, New York, 1970).

2. There is one curious exception. Writing of the surrealism of Rene Magritte Burnham notes, "Magritte's painting needs no commentary; also the artist's few statements are of little help." Notice the language of "needs". Jack Burnham, *The Structure of Art* (George Braziller, New York, 1971) p. 98.

3. patrick Heron, "The Shape of Color", in Benard Smith (ed.) *Concerning Contemporary Art* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975) pp. 154-180. The quoted passages are on pp. 154-155.

4. Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of The New* (McGraw Hill Book Company, New York, 1965, p. 43.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

6. Heron, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

7. Remember the refrain from Tom Lehrer's song "The Old Dope Peddler" ? "He gives the kids free samples/because he knows full well/ that today's young innocent faces/ will be tomorrow's clientele."

8 Even contemporary theater is no exception to the rule of the program notes. Several years ago I attended the London premiere of two newly

commissioned one-act plays by Harold Pinter. The program gave the titles, in order to performance, with a brief account of the content of each play. During the interval between plays I did some extra hard listening to comments from the audience. As expected, the audience reaction and appreciation, as I overheard it, was largely in the terms set by the program description of the first play. No-one I listened to had noticed, however, that the play just performed was not the one described as first in the notes. Without announcement, the order of performances had been reversed!

9. Unfortunately, this is no parody but an actual commentary by Barbara Rose on Dekooning's "Woman and Bicycle", quoted approvingly in Burnham, *op. cit.*, p. 105. One might note how Rose's words could fit my imaginary painting, as well (?) as the entirely different Dekooning, and recall my earlier warning about the A.M.A. trying to explain cancer by means of a text written in Latin. Here too the difficult is "explained" by the unintelligible.

10. Edward T. Cone, "One Hundred Metronomes", *The American Scholar 46* (1977) p. 445.

11. Burnham, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

12. John Berger, *About Looking* (Pantheon Books, New York, 1980) p. 155.

13. Jonathan Bayer, *Reading Photographs* (Pantheon Books, New York, 1977).

14. A good example is Rosalind Krau's essay on the photographs of Brassai : "Nightwalkers", *Art Journal* (Spring, 1981) 33-38.

15. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux New York, 1977). The next few page references are to this book. I think that Sontag is a little more wary of the language/message metaphor than most. For she recognizes the utter variability in the "message". according to context. See, for example, her discussion of the Minamata photographs on p. 106. And she sees that something has gone wrong with the language metaphor when she demurs from valery's suggestion about photographs as descriptions, p. 45. But she does not use these insights to let herself out of the language trap.

16. Burnham, *op. cit.*

17. These ideas are developed and modified by Arthur Danto in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, Harward U. press, 1981 and in three important earlier articles: "The Artworld", *Journal af Philosophy LXI* (1964) 571-584; Artworks and Real Things", *Theoria XXXIX* (1973) 1-17, and "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace",

The Journal of Aesthethetics and Art Criticism XXXIII (1974) 139-148. (The first two articles are reprinted in G. Dickie and R. Sclanfani (eds.), *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology* (St. Martins Press, New York, 1977.)) George Dickie's *The Art Circle* (Haren Pub, New, york,1984) contains a good discussion and critique of Danto's views (in Chapter Two). Appropriately, Dickie is puzzled about Danto's language thesis. (My thanks to George for letting me have a draft copy of the book manuscript). Richard Wollheim, *Art And Its Objects* (Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, England, 1970) also pursues the analogy between art and language (in Secs. 45-58). But for Wollheim the interest is in seeing both art and language as, in wittgenstein's sense, forms of life. Thus Wollheim explicitly (Sec. 56) rejects the analogy between art and a code, the idea that a work of art contains a message to be decoded (or "read"). Moreover he is sensitive to important limitafions (Secs. 57 and 58) on the entire language analogy.

18. It is appropriate to come to see the limitations of the language metaphor in terms of musical experience. For the desire to produce an experience, visually similar to the experience of music is one of the important springboards of the modern visual arts. See, for example, Vallier (*op. cit.*, p. 52) on Kandinsky, and recall the final "boogie - woogie" paintings of Mondrian.

19. Compare even the basic "vocabulary" of a photograph according to Sontag, *op. cit.*, (framing, angle, focus) with that of the experts assembled by Bayer, *op cit.*, (time symbol, organization, space, light). The appropriate response seems to be that of wittgenstein to the idea of a private code. "One would like to say : whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right'." L. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Macmillan Co., New York, 1953), par. 258, p. 92e.

20. John Berger, *op. cit.*, p. 51. The passage from Sontag is supposed to be from her *op. cit.*, but Berger does not give a page reference and, so far, I have been unable to find the passage there.

21. If one emhasized more the concept of function (or use), then one could perhaps build a different theory. Since the one I suggest is certainly wrong, perhaps Berger and Sontag would plead that it is this other theory they actually had in mind. Perhaps so.

22. In this context wollheim, *loc. cit.*, talks about intrausitive verbs. I think it is much the same idea.

23. Jasper Johns, Interview with G.R. Swenson in John Russell and Suzi Gablik (eds.) *Pop Art Redefined* (Praeger, New York, 1969), p 83. Johns goes on to comment about how the public uses of a work defines its meaning in a way essentially out of the control of the artist. Specifically with reference to his beer cans, (ale, actually) his only intention was to see whether a story he had heard, in which De Kooning remarked that his dealer (Leo Castelli) could sell anything, even two beer cans, was correct. It was. The cans were sold for $900, and then resold for $90,000.

24. Calvin Tomkins, *Off The Wall* (Penguin Books, New York, 1981) p. 53.

25. My thanks to Micky Forbes for putting me onto the grammar of "signify/significant" here and, more generally, for her responsive ears.

26. I do not want to place too much emphasis on the use of words in this illustration. For clearly other ways of enriching the setting of the work might achieve similar effects. For instance, a silent film-snippet from "Deep Throat" in the one case, or a bit of accompanying blues music in the other.

27. Quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *op. cit.*, p. 116.