

'An Image of Discontinuity':
Art's Intentional Constellations and Contemporary
Culture

Recognising the multiplicities of contemporary culture requires more than a mere acknowledgement of the fact that different societies have different histories, languages, customs and values. Recognising multiplicity also goes beyond admitting that the irruption of gender, class, ethnicity and education has shattered the supposed homogeneity of 'Western' culture. This much can be acknowledged without forfeiting the assumption that, through combination or selection, an increasingly 'right' or 'true' understanding of the way the world is can be achieved. In other words, this much can be acknowledged without actually recognising multiplicity as a profound rather than superficial phenomenon.

Looking to key discourses within contemporary culture it seems that a profound recognition of multiplicity requires that we realise that there is no neutral point from which to view 'the world'; it requires that we accept that the worlds requested by different viewpoints may be irreconcilable; and it requires that we own the disruptive intractability of the unknown. In words borrowed from the metaphors of science, the observer brings about the properties observed. The kind of questions we ask of the world will determine the kind of answers it gives us and some of those answers will be incompatible. And yet, no one set of questions and answers - or model - is adequate to account for the world. The world actually requires an irreducible interlocking mosaic of continuous, discontinuous and contradictory models. This requirement for multiple models is prompted by what is unknowable or unknowable within each and yet may be approached from within another model. A model which, in turn, will have its own unknowable aspects, and so on.

Or in yet other words, borrowed this time from philosophy, there is no place outside of language - which I understand to mean that we have no access to the world other than through the concepts or framework we bring to bear. Language has no essence - it is infinitely diverse and creative. And, irreconcilable differences arise amongst our diverse 'languages' or 'language games'. As Lyotard argues, any attempt to settle these differences inevitably involves repressing or denying that which cannot be couched in the language of the settlement. What is repressed or refused in any settlement is that which cannot be known from or included

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¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1953.

The multiple readings thus anchored by an artwork may be described, using an astronomical term borrowed from Benjamin and Adorno, as a 'constellation'; that is, as a juxtaposed rather than integrated cluster of readings that resists reduction to an essential core.⁴ Moving from one point in an artwork's constellation of readings to another can cause a dramatic change in the meaning or nature of the work. For example, one of my sculptures, which belonged to two discrete series (embodying two distinct sets of concerns), yielded quite different meanings depending on the body of work within whose context it was viewed. That is, while the physical composition of the sculpture didn't actually change from one series to the next, how the sculpture looked and felt - its whole meaning - did change. This tangible experience of the profound shift in meaning effected by different frameworks or intentional perspectives is one of the crucial contributions Art has to offer to the task of recognising 'the multiplicities of contemporary culture'.

Moving between the constellation of readings anchored by an artwork also reveals the limits of what can be known from any given position. That is, we are confronted by the ineluctable presence of the unknown, and may experience the tension (or potential violence) evoked by simultaneously present and irreducible versions of a 'single' event/entity. Thus, art offers the possibility of exploring what it might be to integrate this experience into our understanding of our own position at any moment in time.

As Joseph Margolis argues, art works are particularly open to being linked to contingent cultural (intentional) themes.⁵ And, once such a set of ideas has been anchored in relation to a given artwork, the viewer is offered a visual and kinaesthetic way of thinking them through. In other words, an isomorphic relationship may be traced between the set of ideas and the relationships within the artwork so that aspects of the one (the artwork) may draw attention to as yet unexamined

its minimally describable features - which negates its status as art. Combination into a single super-reading risks incoherence where alternative readings are discontinuous or incompatible, while choosing between two persuasive readings is absurdly arbitrary.

⁴ See Martin Jay, *Adorno* (London: Fontana, 1984), pp. 14-15.

⁵ Artworks are culturally emergent phenomena and are thus distinguished through their possession of intentional properties - such as the expressive, the representational, the symbolic, the semiotic, and so on. Intentional properties are infinitely variable within the limits imposed by our powers of imagination and discrimination. See Joseph Margolis, *What, After All, Is A Work Of Art*, (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); and *Art and Philosophy* (1980).

within a given position. Thus the irreconcilable differences within language reveal the inescapable presence of 'the unknown'. The violence of this is not simply that of conflict between irreconcilable versions, it is also our resistance to remaining in the company of the unknown.

What is required, therefore, in the face of the multiplicities of contemporary culture is that we develop our ability to explore conflict rather than seek consensus. We need to engage in cultural conversations in which differences are unendingly explored rather than settled, with all the tension that generates. Which brings us to the question posed by the organisers of the conference: Is art flexible enough to convey the multiplicities of contemporary culture?

What makes Art peculiarly suited to conveying cultural multiplicities is an indestructible ambivalence that itself requires recognition of multiple continuous, discontinuous and incompatible readings. Judging by my own experience of making art, there is nearly always more and less in the made work than was anticipated. That is, the work frequently exceeds expectations in some respects and falls short of expectations in other respects. As Umberto Eco argues, engaging with artworks or in the art-making process involves "...[a] continuously open process that allows one to discover ever-changing *profiles* and possibilities in a single form".² Thus, one body of artworks that I made exploring certain ideas regarding 'responsibility for meaning' yielded readings concerned with movement, tensegrity structures in engineering, social issues to do with labour and gender, sociological/anthropological symbolism, and zoological/topographic morphism.

While such diverse readings of the sculptures arose out of different viewers asking different questions of the work or bringing different interests to the work, even a single question can yield multiple readings of an artwork. Depending upon what parts within the sculpture are seen as together and what parts are seen as separate, for example, a particular artwork may be seen alternately as: dynamic or static, flowing or staccato, amorphous or individuated in its parts, explosive or implosive, and so on.³

² Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 74.

³ Strategies for avoiding such multiplicity typically involve: eliminating all but overlapping aspects of alternative readings, combining alternative readings into a single super-reading, or choosing between alternative readings. However such strategies were counterproductive in relation to the artworks. Limiting oneself to the overlapping aspects of alternative readings risks reducing what can be said of the artwork to

aspects of the other (the 'intentional'), thereby yielding grounds for further reflection. Thus, one remarkable feature of art is that where a particular set of ideas (or cultural themes) is raised by an artwork, the tangibility of the latter forges a concrete engagement with the former so that the dynamics, precision and implications of the ideas may be explored.

On a more profound level, the possibility of engaging with a constellation of such cultural themes opens the possibility of exploring the relationship between the diverse perspectives anchored in a single entity, without seeking to settle differences between them. Art thus creates a space in which diverse perspectives can endlessly converse and in which we can learn to explore conflict rather than seek consensus.

Art offers a concrete, kinaesthetic experience of the non-singularity of meaning, or the co-existence of mutually exclusive truths, and the possibility of moving between them. The experience of continuous, discontinuous and incompatible meanings that are anchored in a single artwork makes such discrimination available in confronting the multiplicities of contemporary culture. As Eco writes, "Art suggests a way for us to see the world in which we live, and, by seeing it, to accept it and integrate it into our sensibility". [Art] assumes the task of giving us an image of discontinuity. It does not narrate it; it *is* it".⁶ This is what the wider culture can learn from Art. While linear modes of thought may be useful in that they present information about the world in a relatively clear form, the constellar thinking of Art presents information as a structure in the world; that is, it reveals our 'worlds' as arbitrary and irreducible.

For my presentation I hope to build upon this understanding of the relationship between Art and the multiplicities of contemporary culture by exploring the relationship between Professor Bryson's position and my own. This will involve teasing out connections and differences within our thought processes on a number of themes. I anticipate that this may include some or all of the following: recognition, perception and the sensible presence of a work of art; composition, *durée* and revealing our activity in configuring 'the world'; the place of knowledge in Art; the question of 'the real' - how it is understood and where it is located; and, the place of power.

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⁶ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (1989), p. 90.

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