

WRIGHT

ART 281

The Critique Handbook

A Sourcebook and Survival Guide

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Chapter Two

THE STORY IT TELLS

MEANING

Meaning Is Not Absolute

This section might more accurately be called *the stories they tell* because meaning can never be completely contained in any work of art or in any one of its parts. Although we immediately think of meaning as something that resides comfortably in a work's narrative imagery, it is really a slippery, shifting thing, informed also by a multitude of formal choices made by the artist—when and where a work exists, what it's made of, how it came into being, who made it, and what is carried to it by the viewer. Meanings can change as a work ages, as a political controversy swirls around it, or as information emerges about the artist's life, earlier works, intentions, process, or even personal habits. That isn't to say that a work of art is beyond interpretation, but simply that meaning can never be finite or stable.

Signification

When you hear people using the term *signification* in relation to works of art, they are talking about interpreting its *meaning*. The idea that *meaning* is something that is carried around by a work, like a passenger on a train, is more complicated than it first appears. This can be illustrated by looking at spoken language, where seemingly clear and unambiguous statements can have different *meanings*. In his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton elegantly illustrates this in the following passage, using a simple linguistic command, *close a door*:

Let's go back for a moment to the situation I outlined earlier, where I tell you to close the door when a gale is howling through the room. I said then that the meaning of my words was independent of any private intention I might have—that the meaning was, so to speak, a function of the language itself,

rather than some mental process of mine. In a certain practical situation, the words just do seem to mean what they mean whatever I might whimsically want them to mean. But what if I asked you to close the door having just spent twenty minutes roping you to your chair? What if the door was closed already, or there was no door there at all? Then, surely, you would be quite justified to ask me: "What do you mean?" it isn't that you don't understand the meaning of my *words*: it is that you don't understand the *meaning* of my words. It will not help if I hand you a dictionary. Asking "What do you mean?" in this situation is indeed asking about the intentions of a human subject, and unless I understand these then the request to close the door is in an important sense meaningless.¹

The point Eagleton makes is that *meaning* is never absolute. In Eagleton's scenario, the meaning of the command, "close the door," keeps shifting as the situation around the statement changes. Hence, meaning depends on who is speaking, where they are, who is being addressed, how the message is delivered, and a whole variety of other circumstances, including the weather.

As in language, a work of art may simply be read by what the viewer sees (a soldier or potted plant). However, as in spoken language, signification in a work of art is created by a complex web of operations that includes art history, formal choices, the artist's stated intentions, how the work was made, who made it, and the context in which it is shown.

Denotation and Connotation

Let's say that in a critique, a student presents a carved Styrofoam sculpture that everyone in the class recognizes as an axe on wheels. If we were to ask, "What is it?," everyone in the critique group would no doubt answer, "It's an axe on wheels!" But if we were to ask what the sculpture *means*, we would be unlikely to say that it is *about* an axe on wheels. We would try to understand the work by moving from what the form *denotes* (an axe on wheels) into what it *connotes*, that is, the possible meanings we can attach to the combination of wheels and axe, presented in this particular way at this particular time to this particular group. Thus, the sculpture might *denote* an axe on wheels, but it might *connote* the end of colonialism or the destruction of the rain forest. These can be useful terms when looking at how meaning operates in a work of art. The one is what we plainly *see*, the other is what we can *read* into it.

For most students, it is easy to see how narratives can operate in realistic painting or sculpture, much the way they do in novels or poems. Modernist thinking rejected the notion of art produced to the service of story (one does not make a painting or sculpture *of* anything, rather one paints, one sculpts!). Postmodernist thinking has reembraced the notion of art as a carrier of information, a narrative, a complex system of signs, in other words, a language.

Let's return to our axe-wheel sculpture. The form *denotes* an axe on wheels, but the connotations in operation would not end there. Does the tilt of the form suggest the movement of a motorcycle rounding a corner? What if the sculpture is constructed out of carved Styrofoam, placed on a Styrofoam base and then both sculpture and base are surfaced with a faux bronze finish? Would it not then also read as a monument? Given that it is not a real monument, but a fake one, could we not say that the connotation goes even one step further, and that the sculpture behaves as a kind of spoof on monuments? What if our axe and wheel, faux bronze monument is carved in such a way that it looks like an animation character? How would the combination of axe on wheels, motorcycle tilt, cartoon, and bronze monument add up to produce meaning in the work? What reading might it evoke?

Even if everything else in the sculpture remains the same, if we change the surface treatment, this will again radically alter the meaning. Instead of faux bronze, imagine our carved Styrofoam axe on wheels surfaced to a perfect smooth finish and painted in bright cartoon colors. Imagine it textured to look like concrete, or covered in thousands of tiny magazine clippings with images of a recent military conflict. The possible connotations are as endless as the options.

Content and Subject Matter

Content and *subject matter* are two terms that are sometimes confused in critique. Subject matter is *denotative* and content *connotative*. To differentiate between the terms *subject matter* and *content*, consider two still lifes. Both are of a vase of flowers on a table in a room. There is a window on the back wall with a view of a landscape. The first work is painted in bright colors, with the flowers reaching up toward a light ceiling. The window behind the flowers reveals a pastoral landscape. The other is also a vase of flowers on a table, but the table is cracked and painted with washes of brown. The flowers are wilted, a few of them snapped off, and the window looks out on a dark, barren landscape.

Both are still lifes with flowers in a vase on a table in a room whose back wall reveals a window to the outside. These things in the painting are its subject matter. But each has a very different *content* or *meaning* for the viewer. The difference derives not from *what* the artist chose to paint but from *how* the work was painted, that is, a series of formal choices, made by the artist that have created meaning.

Three Crucifixes

In his book *Learning to Look*, Joshua Taylor² uses two paintings of a crucifixion to illustrate how the same subject matter can be painted to yield very different *expressive content*. One is by Pietro Perugino and the other by Carlo Crivelli, two Renaissance painters from a similar time doing paintings of the same subject. Perugino's crucifix is taller and lighter than that in the Crivelli, which seems heavy and closer to the ground. Color in the Perugino appears in discrete areas and tends to be saturated, whereas Crivelli's landscape is broken up into sharp facets of middletoned earth colors, giving the painting a depressed and disturbing feeling. A thorough formal analysis by Taylor reveals that although both paintings are ostensibly of the same subject, the Perugino clearly emphasizes Jesus' divinity, pointing everything upward, and away from mortal suffering, creating a sublime experience for the viewer. The Crivelli is the opposite. Jesus appears heavy, as does the cross, and close to the ground, which appears sharp and threatening. Whereas the Perugino points hopefully toward resurrection, the Crivelli is an essay in the mortal suffering Christ endured for man's sins. In each case, particular formal choices applied to the same *subject matter* created two disparate meanings.

Now let's take a contemporary (albeit controversial) crucifixion, Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*. Serrano placed a small figurine of Christ on the cross in a jar of urine and photographed it. Although the subject matter is still a crucifixion, the content is once again quite different from either of the masters' paintings. Despite it being a lightning rod for controversies over public funding for the arts, the *meaning* (or content) of Serrano's work is not so black and white. We might ask ourselves is the message *prescriptive* or *descriptive*? Is the artist trying to show us a picture of the way things *are* or the way things *ought to be*? Is the message that Christ *should* be in a bath of urine, as it was interpreted by several government officials who disparaged it? Or is Serrano using the crucifixion as a metaphor for the sorry state of society, thus,

saying something to the effect that Christ represents pure goodness and right now, because the world is so corrupt, he and Christianity as a whole are degraded? It's as if he were contained in this jar of human excrement. This *descriptive* reading of the Serrano would turn the meaning on its head. Clearly, meaning generated out of formal choices also comes up against our own guesses regarding the artist's intentions. Distinguishing between a work that is *prescriptive* as opposed to one that is *descriptive* becomes especially critical in the reading of works with highly charged subject matter.

The Loaded Message

Some subject matter is so strong that it overwhelms formal elements and context. Images that are violent, disturbing, or socially taboo, for instance, will monopolize a viewer's attention. Even if housed in relatively conventional media or formal structures, the *subject matter* will become almost synonymous with the work's *content*. Do we care if the figures are anatomically correct if the work takes us right to a scene from a recent war? Do we worry about lighting or print quality in a photograph that makes each of us a witness at the side of a mass grave? Or, conversely, is the effectiveness of the message inseparable from the effectiveness of the means? As when viewers are distracted from an optimum reading of a work because the craft is so poor?

Is some subject matter so loaded that we are unable to offer an objective critique? How do we deal with a bad painting or a poorly constructed shrine when we know that it is a personal tribute to the artist's lost loved one? In such cases, do we feel hesitant and insensitive pointing out formal flaws even if they interfere with our reading? Work based on personal issues and suffering or based on a student's social identity can be minefields in critique. What happens when a student puts up work that tells a story that is so personal and so loaded that the line between student and artwork begins to blur? Critical commentary may be mistaken for a personal attack.

Self-Portrait

In one critique, a student brought in a series of self-portraits with disturbing facial cuts and bruises. She revealed that she had a personal history of abuse and talked about her therapy, how this was an important issue for her, and so on. To criticize the paintings became a criticism of this brave act

of speaking up. In a sense, to commit verbal battery on top of everything she had already suffered. The instructors and peers in the room became completely disempowered. A purely formal critique—focused on clear strategies for depicting the subject matter—followed, while much of what was really on people's minds went unaddressed.

Finally, an old school modernist painter accused the student of being an illustrator, which brought her to tears. Other faculty and a few students cited social-content painters in her defense. But much of the conversation remained far from the work itself and steered clear of the most interesting issues.

By the same token, work about identity (gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, handicap) can also leave the critique participants declawed, for fear of appearing insensitive, sexist, bigoted, or the like. With these works, it becomes difficult to speak without addressing the delicate and potentially controversial issues that the work provokes. Given that it is often the artist's intention to create a certain discomfort in the viewer, a critique that evolves into a heated discussion can be more productive than one that ignores the issues. Nevertheless, in some works confrontation is neither intended nor welcomed by the artist. How much should it then drive the critique?

Can one love the message and hate the form? Or hate the message and love the form? Imagine a work that addresses a political position with which you agree, but the work is badly drawn or poorly crafted, and the allegory is too obvious. Here, the message is so easily read, so accessible, that the artist's position has been presented without any risk of miscommunication. Contrast this with a work about the same thing, which is well crafted and so formally inventive that it is much less readable. Or what about a work of great beauty that celebrates fascism or hatred?

The Loaded Messenger: How Meaning Is Affected by Who Tells the Story

Some might argue that the identity of the artist should not influence a work's meaning. Indeed the idea that the interpretation of art be reduced to a biographical case study seems misplaced, at best. Still, there are works in which the identity of the artist is part of the content of the work and, in some cases, *the* most important factor in determining its *meaning*. Part of this is the perspective that works of art do not spring out of thin air but are the products of individuals who are themselves operating out of certain cultural and historical experiences. The artist's

gender, ethnicity, culture, and any other factor that informs his or her perspective have to be seen as critical components of the work, as long as they're visible or known.

Imagine that the critique group is looking at a painted portrait of a woman sitting against a red background. We can look at it formally, consider its composition, scale, paint-handling, accuracy of proportion, and how the bright red single-tone ground operates against the figure. We can determine that the brush strokes are almost invisible and that the warm light and cool shadow on the figure are painted to produce a convincing illusion of three-dimensionality in the arms, torso, neck, and face. We can consider the expression or gesture of the figure and speculate as to whether the person in the portrait seems sad, content, pensive, or is in formal pose. Is the identity of the figure important to our reading? If not, then our reading might end here.

What if we find out that the figure in the portrait is a Rwandan genocide victim? Would it be important that the artist knew the individual? Would it be the same work if the artist had never set foot in Rwanda and had worked from a newspaper photograph? Would the fact that the artist was Rwandan influence the way we read the work? Or French? Would it matter if this turned out to be a self-portrait of someone whose entire family had been wiped out in the genocide? Or painted by someone whose father had taken part in the killing?

What about a portrait of a man in minstrel-show black face? We would certainly then want to know more about the motives and identity of the painter. Is this meant to be offensive? Does the painter identify with the man in the portrait? Is it a self-portrait that is meant to critique racial stereotypes or a personal gesture with complex social and psychological implications?

Now consider a painting of a nude. What if the nude is a woman lying face down in an empty lot? Does our interpretation change when we find out that this is the work of a large man with a deep voice as opposed to a soft-spoken female artist?

These are extreme examples but they allow you to see the way meaning can shift according to who tells the story.

Objectification and the Other

When one person uses another person (or people) as the subject of her work, she is already objectifying them to some degree. Whether the artist is trying to expose a social inequity or is simply attracted to the

look of a particular face, she has put someone else's image in the service of her own work. Is there a difference between painting a paid studio model and a paid homeless person in the park? A male artist painting a nude female and a female artist painting one? Or a female artist painting only nude males? Are there rules for who can represent whom? Must an artist speak only from his own experience? Self-portraits aside, images of people in most works of art are of others. When is this irrelevant to the interpretation of the work and when is it central?

How *do* we read works with images of people who are of a different gender, race, or culture than the artist? In many critical circles, the noun *other* has been turned into a verb; thus, someone can *other* another person. Objectify them. *Othering*, according to this way of thinking, can occur over gender lines, racial lines, economic lines, or cultural lines. These lines are inexact and shifting, for people's identities are comprised of many intersecting circles of affinities, which can connect and disconnect them from overarching categories, such as race, gender, nationality, poverty, and so on.

One way to think about it is as a dichotomy between power and powerlessness, where the less powerful can be *othered* by the more powerful. The idea is that culture and language are configured in such a way that the more powerful occupy a kind of neutral position; they represent the norm, if you will, and everyone else is, to greater and lesser degrees, an *other* of some kind. Thus if a white man paints a picture of a white woman, he has *othered* her by means of gender. If the same man paints a picture of a Native American woman, he has *othered* by gender and by ethnicity. How do these concerns play out in the interpretation of artworks?

When we speak of someone who is *other* than ourselves, even if our intentions are noble, do we risk speaking *for* them? Are we, each one of us, *other* in some way to everyone else? Or do particular affinities such as gender or race take precedence in certain debates?

The Indignity of Speaking for Others

Martha Rosler, in 1974–1975, did a work called *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, the subject of which was a poor neighborhood on the lower east side of New York, where a lot of homeless alcoholics and drug addicts congregated. The work consists of photographs of storefronts that alternate with separate texts that list words having to do with inebriation. The texts are neither *captions* of the photographs, nor are the photographs *illustrations* of the texts. And

there are no people in the photographs of the storefronts. Rosler is presenting two distinct descriptive systems, neither of which adequately tells the whole story.

What is this strategy all about? She is, in essence, trying to make a work about the Bowery, without objectifying her subjects (creating *victim art*) or even speaking on their behalf (photography as social work), because that would, as she sees it, make her an agent of the system that has silenced and marginalized them in the first place. In Rosler's work, the *who* is part and parcel of the meaning, and drives the formal decisions. The positioning of her privileged eye is further complicated by the fact that she is a woman looking at men.

The Female Nude

If you were to hear that a student presented for critique a painting of a nude female, this would probably sound like a relatively neutral statement. You would likely imagine a critique of a painting depicting a studio model, which focused on light, shadow, composition, line quality, modulations of tone, and above all accuracy of proportion.

What if this female figure is positioned in a seated pose facing the viewer, hands clasped behind her head, and legs spread apart? We *could* describe the painting formally. "The painting has a symmetrical composition. The centered figure creates a strong vertical axis interrupted by a horizontal axis in the top half of the picture plane and a triangle in the bottom half." We could call it a female nude, and limit our comments to proportion, the modulation of light and shadow, line quality, key, palette, and paint handling. Would this feel normal or ridiculous? Who in the critique group would see the painting as a nude figure study and who would see it as a scene with a naked woman? What if you now learn that this is a self-portrait? How will this affect your reading? What if you discover that this is a painting by a male student of his ex-girlfriend? What if it is a painting by a female student of *her* ex-girlfriend? Or an older male student of his daughter? Is a nude ever *just a nude*?

Long hair

A student brings to the critique a nondescript wooden table, a chair, and a small beautifully made wooden box. She arranges the table and chair in a corner of the room facing out and places the box on the table. Everyone is curious about what is in the box. She asks to be scheduled at the end of the

critique day. When it is her turn she takes her place behind the table. She is nude. She opens the box and takes out a brush. The inside lid of the box has a small mirror that is visible to some in the group. She brushes her hair for what seems like a very long time. Her hair is waist length. Just as the group begins to get restive she takes out a pair of scissors and closes the lid of the box. The group gets very quiet. She then proceeds to chop her hair to a few inches from her scalp. Everyone gasps. She walks out of the room. Later in critique everyone is silent at first. Someone asks if she had always had long hair and how long did it take to grow it. Most of the conversation centers around the irrevocable nature of the action. That it is performance, but it is *real*. No one asks if she made the box. (She did.) Some of the students know that it is her fortieth birthday. But they don't say.

The Persistence of Nudity

The female nude is still one of the most common sights on the studio walls of many art schools, and figure study remains a mainstay in the development of a student's drawing skills. Let's take a moment to consider the nude itself. Although the study of the figure is less and less central to the training of artists, the rendering of the nude is still a staple of most drawing courses. The tradition of rendering the academic nude has come down to us from the Renaissance, inspired itself by Roman fresco and Greek and Roman statuary. The nude was an idealized human form, whose power rested in the idea that man was created in God's image. Indeed, the Greek gods, where the tradition begins, were imagined as very humanlike beings, that ate, drank, argued with one another, and even had love affairs. The incredibly proportioned images of these gods, found in temples and friezes, such as the Elgin marbles, must have seemed magical to early Renaissance artists as compared to the flat symbolic forms of their predecessors. Accepted by Christian theologians as an idealized embodiment of the divine and embraced by humanists as the preferred instrument for illustrating man's centrality, the tradition of the nude and the tradition of painting and sculpture have been inseparable.

Rigorous training in the rendering of the human form was then at the core of an artist's training and has remained so until recently. But what has perhaps been overlooked is that an artist's facility in depicting the nude was a means to an end, the end being a mastery that enabled an artist to create narratives, with humans at their center. What we now call academic figure drawing and painting often focuses solely on accurate rendering and good composition—the creation of *nudes for nude's sake*. An instructor thus might caution students not to think about content

until after they have perfected their skills in representing the figure, and tend to avoid discussions of content in critique.

What Is a Nude?

In his famous television series and accompanying book *Ways of Seeing*,³ art writer John Berger takes issue with the art historian Kenneth Clark and differentiates between the terms *naked* and *nude*. A naked person, Berger argues, is a person without clothes; a nude, by contrast, is a person whose nakedness is worn as a kind of disguise. This *disguise*, he insists, turns the naked model into no one in particular. Thus the nude, by definition, is implicitly a form of dehumanization.

Four Female Nudes

Four students present work in critique. First up is a quiet soft-spoken young man of about thirty with long hair and non-descript clothes. He presents a painting approximately six feet by four feet. The painting is of a nude female figure rendered in an old masters technique. The student's drawing skills are evident in the work, the figure's proportions are almost perfect. Layers of glaze have been applied to create her transparent luminous skin. The figure is posed to look sexually provocative, and indeed the artist shares with the group that the title is *Miss December*. A debate erupts between two students over whether he has worked from a model or a photograph. One asserts that the best figure painting is done from life, and he is sufficiently impressed with the work to propose that in spite of the title it *must* be drawn from life. Another argues that the whole point is that the artist has ironically appropriated a centerfold and reconfigured it into a gorgeous classical painting. Three women in the room say that they think the painting is offensive, but three others declare it to be wonderful and funny. The artist scowls and mutters, "some people should lighten up."

A second student presents a work. He is a tall twenty-four-year-old, with teased blue-black hair, knee high boots, and a shirt unbuttoned to his waist. Most everyone in the class suspects that he is the lead singer in a band, but it can't be confirmed with any certainty. The painting depicts a nude female, done in bold expressive gestures over a dark paynes gray ground, creating an emotional space that is at once dreary and theatrical. The nude figure is squatting down, facing the viewer, with arms raised and palms out. Much of the conversation centers around the paint handling, which most agree is quite good. Again, a few of the women ask, "What is with the nude women in this class?" The artist politely begs everyone's pardon but defends his work by offering that the woman in his painting is a mythological character, who he calls Lilith, and that she has nothing to do with any of the *modern* women in the room.

A third student presents work. She is a short, stocky sixty-five-year-old with clear blue eyes and steel gray hair. She presents a series of twelve drawings. They are clearly self-portraits. In each, she is standing very straight and looking directly out. All of the poses are identical and each drawing differs only slightly. When someone in the critique group notices that each drawing is dated at the bottom, it becomes clear that the drawings were made over twelve consecutive days. Discussion follows as to whether this is a kind of visual diary, and what that might mean. Some students are skittish about bringing up the clear anatomical problems in the figures. Surprisingly, the student with the perfectly rendered, old master nude solemnly and seriously suggests that the work is about redefining beauty and may be about incremental passages of time. He also declares the drawings to be quite beautiful, both in terms of their formal choices and their subject matter.

A fourth student presents work. She is of medium height and wears stiletto heels, a tiny red leather skirt, and a very tight pink sleeveless sweater. She presents three large color photographs, all of which are self-portraits, shot from above. In all three, she is naked and looks directly at the viewer. In one she is lying on what appears to be a green satin sheet and holds a green rubber snake close to her face. In the next she is lying on a bright pink furry background and balances a tall layer cake on her stomach. In the third she is lying on a black rubber mat and holds a whip, with arms extended. Everyone in the critique group agrees that the works are intentionally erotic, citing her expression, her lack of clothing, and her pose. A few are confused by the work, and say that she is degrading herself but that she also seems very powerful. Others counter this might be the case if the photographs were someone else's work, but the fact that these are self-portraits makes it different. Most agree that the photographs reference soft-core pornography. A discussion develops over whether the artist is spoofing or *serious*.

In all of these examples, a kind of triangle of meaning occurs between the artist, the image, and the viewer. A male painter who paints a female nude is part of a long tradition where silent, naked female models are sites for the privileged gaze of first the male painter and then the spectator-owner. Indeed, such paintings were sometimes commissioned to depict the mistress of a powerful man in the guise of a goddess or heroine at the center of a mythological narrative. The image was thus *clothed* as a conventionally acceptable *nude*. That women are usually naked and men generally clothed in artworks was seen, until recently, as a *meaning-free* fact of tradition. As artists have begun to explore questions of where meaning occurs in works of art, questions about the nude have become inevitable.

How might the critique discussion change if we substitute male nudes in the above examples? When a male artist or female artist paints a naked man? How might we talk about these works if they have all been painted by women? Or men? In all four cases, the artists seem to be consciously *engaged* with the image of women through the depiction of the *female nude*. How might the discussion go if the student, who has created one of these works, vehemently denies any interest or awareness of this issue? Do the meanings that the viewer sees become part of the work? And if so, does it in any way become the artist's responsibility to acknowledge that?

Gender to Culture

Let's open up another can of worms. Now consider how the critique discussion might change if one of the works described above is a nude female wearing an African mask. Would you associate the painting with Picasso's 1907 modern masterpiece *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*? Would you want to know if the artist had some particular interest in African culture? With Picasso? Would it change your view of the work if the artist happened to be African American? African? Owned the mask?

A high regard for non-Western and ancient art informed formalist criticism. Indeed, works from the continent of Africa, regions in the South Seas, and from Native American collections all had a major influence on the development of European modernism. It was thought that any work of art, whatever its cultural or historical particulars, can be directly apprehended through its form, because matters of form are universal. Critics have since argued this point. To a greater or lesser extent, the historical and cultural origins of any work are part of the equation of meaning.

The Postcolonial World

Let's move from *gender* to ask how *culture* operates in relation to authorship. We must first recognize that the dialogue around a work of art does not happen in a vacuum, but within a given cultural and historical context. That is, it changes in relation to the world around it.

If you were to travel back in time to 1950 and land in a critique at most any art school, you probably wouldn't hear people discussing anything found in this chapter. The nude would be taken for granted, most of the students and faculty would be well-dressed males of European heritage, and *Western* culture would just be culture. The

model would typically be female. Discussion would not address the cultural perspective of the artist, and there would be little writing about these issues, which are now part of the mainstream debate. This was not because the cultural origin of the artist was overlooked, but because the work was simply assumed to have been created from a Western European perspective. Any non-Western cultural imagery would still be contextualized within the Western tradition, usually as exotic, noble, primitive, or naïve.

The rise of feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the subsequent (and substantive) addition of women's perspectives to the mainstream of art making, forced artists and critics to consider issues of authorship. When we looked at the female nude earlier, much of our discussion was predicated on these ideas.

In the same spirit, we can look at how the addition of what we might call "non-Western" artists to this mainstream dialogue has changed the kind of work that is produced and forced us to consider the *who* behind any artwork. The addition of work produced from regions outside of the art centers in Europe and the United States, or by artists with cultural heritages or experiences from those regions, has changed the nature of the debate in significant ways.

The reasons behind this shift are many: the expansion of mass communication by way of the Internet, the emergence of a new trans-global art community, the increased influence of new nations, many still in formation out of a world once divided up into colonial spheres of influence. We are describing the *postcolonial world*. As was the case with the addition of significant numbers of women artists in the 1970s, the emergence of non-European artists in a growing global conversation both deepens and broadens the discourse for there are more stories being told by previously silent voices.

Affiliations

Let's consider works that reference a *culture* other than the artist's own. What if the artist who references another culture does it in the spirit of solidarity? Do the artist's good intentions override any unintentional misrepresentations? How do we define someone as being *other* than ourselves? How do we read a work made by a European woman that depicts an African and Asian woman standing together? Is she objectifying them from a position of dominance? Or does the artist's gender turn the *they* into a *we*? How do we define race in an increasingly intermingled world,

where labels become less and less definitive? These discussions become increasingly complex within the context of shifting social affinities, as the markers left by colonialism give way to other identifiers.

For many students, these concerns may seem to strangle creativity and threaten artistic freedom. Yet the complexities of the *who*, the *what*, the *when*, the *where*, and the *how* are all paths that lead to understanding a work in the fullest sense.

Content and Form in Political Art

Art made within the context of political change or work that seeks to catalyze such changes is often born out of urgency and necessity. Many artists working within these social dynamics assert that such circumstances demand an art that offers *readable* narratives—paintings, drawings, or sculptures grounded in realism, which is more suitable for conveying unambiguous messages that anyone can understand. From this viewpoint, both formalist abstraction and pretty landscapes are as objectionable as works asserting an opposing political view.

The play between form and content seen historically in the works of artists concerned with the social function of art is a complex debate. For those who stress the importance of readability, formats are favored that offer maximum narrative delivery. Work that is experimental, thus less readable, falls short. According to this way of thinking, the work might be inventive, it might be interesting, but in the end it does not communicate. Other artists who are engaged with social issues embrace a different way of thinking. They claim that new art forms, which challenge both social and *artistic* traditions, offer the greatest potential for dialogue in a changing world. Indeed, they argue that experimental language can expose the hidden power relationships that contribute to oppression. The question becomes whether it is possible to have revolutionary ideas in the tired old language of the socioeconomic structure that you are challenging. Do new ideas and perspectives require a brand new experimental delivery system? And, if so, will the message still be readable?

In 1986, the antiapartheid activist Albie Sachs declared (with tongue in cheek),

... our members should be banned from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle. ... Can it be ... that when the comrades go to bed they discuss the role of the white working class? ... What are we fighting for but for the right to express

our humanity in all its forms, including our sense of fun and capacity for love and tenderness and our appreciation of the beauty of the world! [and] ... Let us write better poems and make better films and compose better music.⁴

Can images and forms become stale? Does the content of the messages make the delivery systems less relevant? Are accessible works more appropriate for communication to wider audiences or do we insult and patronize these audiences by entertaining such notions? What *is* the message? Whatever the message, do we still need to make better paintings, better sculptures, better films? What forms will these *better* works take? What images will they carry? Must form and image be constantly reinvented?

Aesthetic Horror

Subject matter and formal delivery can be intentionally contradictory. Francisco Goya's painting of Saturn eating his children is masterfully painted with fine luminous color. Yet it depicts a gruesome decapitated body of a child being devoured. There have been many gorgeous depictions of bloody heads on plates, tortures, and rapes throughout the history of painting and sculpture.

What about a beautiful and heroic portrait of a man guilty of hideous deeds? Is the artist complicit in the validation of such an individual? Or, conversely, might the artist be effectively addressing the seductiveness of power by catching the viewer in an act of admiration against his will? Is there a way to depict terrible things simply as they are, without judgment?

Immediate Readings: Putting Denotation to Work

In looking at meaning in critique, consider what might be an initial entry point. In some works, particularly those that operate with clearly readable narratives, we can enter the work by looking at *the story it tells*. Immediate readings are *denotative* and take us first to a straightforward description of what we see—a nativity scene, two soldiers wrestling, a city on fire.

Initial descriptions should be as specific as possible. For example, what if we describe the nativity scene as being a copy of a masterwork in which everyone is dressed in contemporary clothing? What if our description of two soldiers wrestling includes the observation that one is dressed in pink and one in blue? What if we see a painting with images of a city on fire, but the city is unrecognizable? What if the city

can be clearly read as New York? London? Baghdad? These straightforward descriptions of *what we see* have already begun to address *meaning* in the work being critiqued.

Foregrounding and Meaning

The starting place for accessing a work's meaning is often an element that has been explicitly emphasized by the artist. This may take the form of compelling imagery, but it may also be a formal element that stands out, such as a color, shape, material, or an object's placement in a room. It may be that the work occurs on an unusual site or in an unexpected context. When an element has been pushed to the front of a work of art—that is, it stands in relief to the rest of the work—we say that it has been *foregrounded*.⁵ In our quest for meaning, we can begin with our initial impressions of these foregrounded elements, and then proceed to peel back the layers.

Sometimes this peeling back occurs on site with careful looking, and other times through progressively deeper and deeper investigations into the things outside of a work that have informed it.

Imagine a video work. The piece is a short three-minute film that shows two figures wrestling. The figures are dressed in business suits. An initial reaction from many of the students in the critique group will be the simple observation that the video shows two businessmen fighting. In this scenario, the artist has *foregrounded* the business attire and the wrestling. We read the video as an allegorical statement about competitive capitalism. But, let's say that some members of the class recognize that these are not just generic executives, but the faces of real CEOs that have been keyed in by the video artist. What's more, the CEOs are from corporations that have been embroiled in a recent scandal. By foregrounding the identities of the wrestlers, the artist has now made the narrative specific.

Now imagine that the critique space has been set up to resemble a corporate boardroom and we, as viewers, are all sitting in chairs that have been arranged around a huge boardroomlike table and are turned toward a projected image of the wrestling video. The artist has now placed us in the scene, prompting us to ask about our own complicity in the scenario. Does the meaning change if we are told that this very video projection was smuggled into a real corporate boardroom the week before and presented, unbeknown to the officers of the scandalized company, in the place of a planned marketing video.

How important to the reading of the work is the recognition that the faces are from current media sources, and how important is it that we know the

story of the scandal? What if sounds of cheers and whoops are added to evoke a sports bar environment? What if the sound track plays a love song? What if we hear exaggerated groans and grunts, borrowed from a martial arts movie? In tracking the meaning of the work, we move from a simple description of a film of two men fighting to two particular individuals fighting on a video screen in a highly charged location.

Form as Content

We have seen how meaning can be explored through a peeling back of layers of imagery. But let us for a moment step back and consider works where there is no recognizable imagery. What if our immediate entry point is color? Sound? Scale?

What do we make of a three-dimensional form that seems remarkably small in relation to the room it's in? How do we read a print that depicts a tiny dense scribble that seems to float in an enormous field or one that shows a torso radically cropped and crowded against the edge of the picture plane? Here *scale* is foregrounded. Consider a work made with small objects arranged in a grid pattern on a floor, or a work made with those same small objects scattered across the floor. When we walk into the room, we would likely think *grid* or *scatter* before considering any individual object. Here composition is foregrounded. And with the scatter piece, the foregrounded composition leads to thoughts about gesture. We immediately wonder whether the artist carefully placed or just scattered the objects.

Let's look at those works where meaning resides wholly or at least primarily in materiality, design, composition, or another formal property. As we discussed in the chapter on formal matters, these works are often self-referential, works that are *about* color, form, materiality, space, or light. Meaning arises not through a reference to something outside of the work, but through the formal operations that occur within the work. In such works, we might even say that form *is* content.

Color

As we discussed in the last chapter, color is not always just a formal element but also can operate *as* content. Examples of this are works constructed entirely out of single colors of dried pigments, poured paint, or groupings of fragments from like-colored found objects; works where canvas and frame support a flat single color field that does not operate to the service of any image or pattern; or video projections of shimmering,

shifting color. When faced with these kinds of works in critique we find ourselves hard-pressed to say that the work is *about* anything beyond red, blue, green, or black, or whatever other shades or hues that the material delivers. A stretcher bar and canvas may support the color in a painting. Armatures or boxes may be employed to present or contain the pigments in a sculpture. A video projector may be used to produce a room of colors that swell and fade. But as long as those supports, armatures, or containers retain a low profile in the visual language of the work, color dominates meaning. In these examples, looking for narrative content doesn't lead us far beyond a simple naming of the color, and to a lesser degree, the shape and texture of the particular form that delivers it. Would we not say that these works are *just* about the color?

Color as Emotion

Nevertheless, color works on our emotions. Studies have documented the calming effects of blue, which some research has attributed to our ancient ancestors walking the flat African savanna under great blue skies. Blue can also signify depression, as in the American blues or Picasso's blue period. A popular belief among bullfighters held that a bull becomes dangerous when a red cape is waved in front of it.⁶ Could this be related to the expression, "He was so angry he was seeing red?" A room bathed in pink light will have a different emotional impact than one bathed in yellow. Thus, even a six-foot-square blue canvas that claims to be only about itself can't help but work on our emotions as well as create associations if, say for example, the particular blue just happens to resemble the blue of a television screen as opposed to a big savanna sky. Whether our responses are hardwired or culturally conditioned, color can't help but carry with it some measure of emotional content.

Color as Symbol

Beyond its emotional charge, color can stand for things outside of itself. Whole books have been written about the various symbolic values of color, be they universally shared or culturally distinct. Green is jealousy, black is evil, yellow is cowardice, and so on. In many Western cultures, people get married in white and grieve in black. In India, weddings are brightly colored and death is white. For Americans, the combination of red, white, and blue is patriotism. During the Cold War, red was communism. In Imperial China, yellow was reserved for the Emperor,

and thus a forbidden color. Color operates in relation to the meanings that a particular culture has given it, sometimes directly standing in for an idea—as in red, white, and blue streamers at a Fourth of July party.

How does the image of a red and black Nazi flag change when we substitute the colors for pink and white? What happens if the red, white, and blue colors of the American flag are changed to shades of green? Does a subtle selection of one hue lead us to think of money and another, ecological, issues?

Color as Index

What about more complex signifying functions with color, where color is arbitrarily assigned a meaning, as in a color key on a map, which points to various topographies, or the blue and red states that mark Democratic and Republican election results on television news broadcasts. Here again, color becomes content, not by pointing to itself, but by being *indexed* to something outside of itself.

Let's consider a painting project by the artist Byron Kim called *Synecdoche*, composed of panels painted in colors that closely matched the skin tones of people who posed for the artist. Although these panels look like formal color studies, color has another meaning. The subtle tones of beige and brown are *indexed* to the color of each person's skin. The work at once references abstract painting and issues of race and identity.

Crayola

In critique we are looking at what appears to be a small painting of stripes. The arrangement of the colors suggests a spectrum, and we might first find meaning in the work by calling it a rainbow. Because it is an intimate work measuring less than 6" × 6" we might decide that scale is foregrounded and first talk about that. Displayed on the wall at eye level with no visible support or frame, it looks like a small abstract painting with a pattern of regular vertical stripes in colors organized to resemble a rainbow—the shades moving from violet to blue, green, yellow, orange, and red.

With a closer look, observant critique participants see that the painting is an inch thick, and that the striped pattern continues beyond the picture plane and around its edges. Further inspections reveal that the color is, in fact, not a surface application but a solid block! In other words, the color is not just a skin on a support but the material out of which the painting, now defined as an object, has been made. There is a saturated quality to the color, and many

students guess that it is pigment suspended in wax. Then one student notices that the work has a peculiar but familiar smell. At the same time a title card is spotted pinned nearby. It reads: "Crayola." The painting has been made with crayons that have been melted, poured into tiny U-channel molds, and then presented on the wall.

Here we have moved from abstract to rainbow-striped painting, to striped object to a box of Crayola crayons. Does it make a difference if these are the artist's own crayons or if the project has been done with found crayons? What if this is really just wax and pigment, and the title is a fake? How important is the smell? How important is the title card to a reading of the work? How important is it that the painting is really a solid object? And what if, when we take a closer look, we discover that this is actually a skillfully painted trompe l'oeil oil on canvas?

Thus color can be employed to evoke or *represent* meaning as well as *be* its own meaning. Works may be constructed completely out of color—whether made out of raw pigment, colored lights, or objects of a chosen color. Color can be completely self-referential, that is, *about* blueness, redness, yellowness, and the like. Saturated pigments can be applied to shapes that then read as solid blocks of color. Layers of paint can be applied onto simple three-dimensional shapes or two-dimensional supports that function as sites upon which the color has accumulated. Works can be created with projected, reflected, or framed light. Natural red oxides can be used to temporarily dye small pools in wilderness settings. Found discarded objects can be collected and arranged in groups of like color and configured into simple shapes. Plastic bags or clear vessels can be filled with colored water and hung in various configurations. Colored threads can be unwound into delicate airy piles. Video monitors can be stacked in a darkened room and left on glowing blue screen. All of these variables can create and modify meaning.

Patterns as Meaning

Patterns operate much the same way that color does to evoke meaning by referencing commonly accepted symbols or familiar cultural iconography. For example, a simple pedestal or a stretched canvas will read differently if uniformly covered in camouflage material, red-checked cloth, or tie-dyed fabric. One creates an immediate reference to the military, another to cartoon picnic, and another to hippie culture.

Palette

The kind of palette an artist uses creates its own responses in the viewer. A quiet, subdued palette and a loud, highly saturated one will solicit different emotional responses. Palette also contextualizes a work in relation to works by other artists or whole periods of art history. What happens when a painting of a '57 Chevy parked at an Exxon station is made of the nuanced earth colors of a Leonardo? Or, inversely, a Madonna and Child, rendered in the style of Filippino Lippi, is painted in day-glow colors. In each case the palette becomes *foregrounded* because it is unexpected. Likewise, within a work, if a relatively uniform palette occurs throughout, a sudden rupture of that system is foregrounded, as in a patch of bubblegum pink in a painting otherwise made up of umbers and siennas. Any painting restricted to only black and white is immediately noticed for its refusal of color.

A refusal of color becomes foregrounded when an artist is working within a tradition or medium that normally relies on color. A famous foregrounding of black and white in a color film are the scenes of dreary gray Kansas in the context of colorful Oz. Inversely, in the bleak world of Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, shot entirely in black and white, there is a single shot of a little girl walking on a gray urban street. The red of her dress is the only piece of color in the three-plus-hour film about the Holocaust, and appears as a small ray of hope in a relentlessly brutal and depressing film experience. Some magazine and television ads have recently begun to appear in black and white so that they are foregrounded against the color programming around them.

A Theater of Forms (Placement as Signification)

A single mark can *activate* a blank sheet of paper. A single object can activate a room. The dynamics of placement are critical to signification in works of art. This occurs when we consider the room (or site) around a sculpture to be a kind of active stage. In other words, we look not only at how our reading of the sculpture is informed by the object itself, but also by its relationship to the space around it. Let's consider how position and context can add yet another layer of meaning by going back to our axe on wheels monument. We might ask ourselves: How does the meaning of the sculpture change if it is placed at the center of a small room with a dramatic spotlight? How does its meaning shift if it is set up in a large room, jammed into a corner, and perhaps even facing that corner? How does its meaning change if it is taken outside of the crit room and set up in relationship to a real monument?

Whether a work is hiding in a corner, bursting through a wall, clutching a ceiling, basking in the spotlight, or even impersonating something other than itself, placement contributes to meaning through what we can call its *theatrical function*. In some ways, the sculpture behaves like an actor on a stage. This can be most easily recognized in a sculpture with strong figurative references. Meaning can be read not only through the modeling, gesture, or expression of the figure but also in relation to its location in the room. The artist acts as a kind of director in a staged drama. Even the most reductive abstract form can operate theatrically by means of its placement in space. A black steel box can be placed in the center or corner of a large room, attached high on a wall, left on an elevator or busy sidewalk. Each placement provokes a very different reading.

Configurations

The potential for placement is further expanded when the sculpture is made up of parts in various groupings. This allows for configurations that suggest tensions and affinities, affiliations and interactions. How do we read a single figure on a pedestal in contrast to a pair of figures placed nose to nose? What if they are back to back or huddled in a corner? Imagine fifty child-size figurative sculptures arranged in military rows or scattered throughout three adjacent rooms in loose gatherings. What happens when we put these same figures beneath the stairs of a fire escape or seat them in each of the four corners of a room? Imagine them placed with feet flat against a gallery ceiling or even walking up the wall.

Whether grouped in a circle or marching out the door, the configuration of objects in a space is the configuration of meaning. Does this theater occur within a strictly inscribed area? Are we, as viewers, positioned in this theater as audience, or do we enter the theatrical space as participants? Are the boundaries of this theatrical space at all negotiable? What is the relationship of this theatrical space to the world beyond the critique room?

Composition as Meaning in Paintings and Drawings

We noted earlier that a picture plane and a gallery space can each act as a context for an infinite number of arrangements of formal elements, that is, compositions. The way that forms or marks are arranged can, in

turn, point to meanings. A lone mark in a large field of white can express lonely isolation, a large form crowding out a smaller one can seem to be about power and overthrow. A densely cross-hatched picture plane can feel heavy and depressed. Like-sized forms, symmetrically arranged, can say order, whereas haphazardly scattered organic shapes of various sizes invoke chaos.

Let's go back to our image of businessmen and sit them around a boardroom table. This time we have a fairly realistically rendered oil on canvas. What can we read into the image if the table runs horizontally across the canvas and the figures are evenly spaced along the horizontal axis, as in Leonardo's *Last Supper*? What if all of the figures are wearing gray suits with black neckties? Does each figure read as one among many equals? What if all of the figures are faceless? We are beginning to read a content into the work that has to do with replaceable corporate drones, a loss of humanity, conformity, and so on. What if the central figure has his hand out in a gesture or is wearing a bright red necktie? Does he suddenly become the focal point of the narrative? What happens if the table is round and the closest figures have their backs to the viewer? Or the long table is turned 90 degrees, and rendered in one-point perspective so that one figure sits at the central vanishing point, facing the other figures at the table, who look back at him? In this scenario, the spectator seems to stand behind the seated figures, participating in and reinforcing the formation, which empowers the central figure. There are endless arrangements and formal choices that can point a narrative in one direction or another. Much of this comes to light when, at the start of a critique, we simply describe in detail what is in front of us.

Format Choices as Meaning in Paintings and Drawings

Is there such a thing as a neutral or ideal picture plane, that is, a picture plane that isn't associated with anything outside of itself? What shape would it be? A rectangle placed horizontally suggests a landscape; placed vertically, a portrait. An extreme horizontally placed rectangle can reinforce a feeling of claustrophobia if the image it carries is a man lying in a coffin underground. It can make a panoramic landscape more panoramic. Even so, artists have consistently accepted conventional rectangular formats as relatively neutral, conceding that any implicit meanings have been all but extricated by the pervasiveness of such paintings within the tradition.

Nevertheless, this is one reason many abstractionists have embraced the square, a rotatable shape that is thought to elude associations with the outside world, and that lends itself to grid-based constructions. With no top or bottom, the perfect square appears to be the most self-referential format, rejecting systems of perspectival and narrative space in favor of flat nonhierarchical visual systems. Indeed, a square field painting may actually *signify* a refusal of narrative.⁷

The Inevitability of Meaning

Let's look at how signification can still operate in the most reductive abstract work. Take four identical square black acrylic paintings:

Four Black Squares

The first square is called *Study #1*. This black square might be read as a self-referential formal investigation.

The second black square is called *Window into a Void*. This might suggest that the artist is using reductive painting to explore optical illusion, the black square reading as a deep space beyond the frame.

The third black square is titled *Representing the Un-Representable*. Perhaps we'd read this one as symbolic of a spiritual exploration.

Finally, the fourth painting is titled with a simple date and a name. We learn that it is a memorial to a friend of the artist.

In the first black square, form is content. The black square is *about* the materiality and blackness of black pigment and the symmetry of a square support. Period. The second work creates an optical effect and addresses painting's traditional role as an imaginary window frame, creating a momentary illusion of a space beyond the space of the room. The smooth handling of black pigment to produce the most convincing illusion of a hole in the wall becomes crucial here. The notion of a black square operating as symbol is explored in both the third and fourth works. In the third, the abstract form is not self-referential but refers to a transcendent idea that the artist claims to be unnamable and unrepresentable. The fourth piece relies on shared associations with the tradition of black mourning veils or armbands. In other contexts, associations with South Africa's black sash antiapartheid protest group or the Islamic black chador, for example, could come into this symbolic reading. Consider how the fourth black painting would change in meaning if we

were to find out that our square painting is not a painting after all, but a black cloth stretched over a frame and presented as a painting. And what if this cloth is actually a fragment of the memorialized person's clothing and is itself charged with symbolic value?

Let's continue our example to make one more point, by imagining that another artist comes in with a fifth black square painting, just like the others, and sets up a small title card that reads: *Five Surrogates*. His work now pulls all of the other black paintings into the context of a series of multiples and all that this implies in terms of mass production and questions of originality.

Gesture as Meaning

A figurative work communicates a wealth of meaning through the gestures of its figures. Is the head bowed in defeat or reverence, are the arms raised in victory or lamentation? Does the figure seem to stride or scurry, slink or strut? Does the turn of the head seem effortlessly graceful or strained and distorted?

Do these same principles apply to a nonfigurative work? An abstract sculpture made of steel rods might curve and flow through a room in such a way that our eyes follow the lines around the space. The rods might form a dense knot or explode outward in all directions. They might collide with the wall and bend against it or form a complex grid that blocks our path. A single rod might be placed floor to ceiling or laid on the floor. Each of these configurations has its own gesture—it explodes out, turns in on itself, aggressively attacks, or blocks our path. And although these configurations are formal, they attack, intrude, and so on. Indeed, form carries with it an emotional content. An abstract form can suggest figurative gesture. Gesture can also be explored in abstract work through movement of the viewer's body or eye.

Gesture is also present in work when the act of its making, that is, the artist's gesture—remains evident in the form. When material *and* process of construction are foregrounded, then the *meaning* of a work will be described in terms of the actions that have created the work—for example, scattering, tossing, pouring, or tying.

Gesture works the same way in a drawing or painting except, once again, our context is a two-dimensional picture plane. A drawing's surface reveals that it has been scribbled, scratched, or erased. A painting that has been poured or flung into existence becomes the

evidence of this pouring or flinging. Drips and drops, lines and marks of paint on a surface contain a discernable energy and direction of movement. When we see a painting that consists of drips that start at the top of the canvas and drip down and eventually off the canvas, we think of paint or solvent being poured and a collaboration between the artist and gravity. Works like these that are records of an artist's activity foreground the act of painting, such that the marks or drips of paint become signifiers of the act. How do you read a painting whose surface is covered with what seem to be quick, multidirectional brush strokes, as if the artist just whipped it out all in one sitting? Do the marks become signifiers of the spontaneous act itself? At the same time doesn't our eye follow the marks as they point in one direction after another? A heavy brush mark of paint that diagonally slices across the canvas creates a directional, unstable dynamic movement that can support or undermine a narrative, or simply mark off space. A uniform series of six four-inch-wide vertical strokes that move horizontally across a canvas will create a horizontal rhythm or anchor a group of curved lines of paint beneath them. Note also that a rectangular canvas has an upward or sideways gesture depending on whether it's presented vertically or horizontally. The neutrality of a square is, in part, because of the static nature of its gesture.

Material as Meaning

What a work is made of contributes to its meaning. If an artist carves a hammer, figure, or a fist out of wood, leaving the wood grain visible, then the carved image will be inseparable from associations we bring to wood. The rough, chiseled surface becomes evidence of the act of carving. And the material itself will carry associations of other things made of wood, such as crafts, instruments, or tools.

If a sculpture is made with perfectly fitted joints and expensive woods, craft is foregrounded. In fact, we might even conclude that the meaning of the work is as much about *woodworking* as it is about hammer, figure, or fist.

Our lived experiences with a given material come into play when we look critically at how material choices influence meaning. Imagine a large pot turned on its side. Made with hammered steel, it can be read as a fragment of armor—referencing something from medieval or modern warfare. The same vessel, made out of sun-baked clay, might make us think of primitive architecture.

Noeth

In the fall semester of 2001, a student brought in for critique what appeared to be a small ink drawing on a piece of primed canvas. It was an image of a sailor and was titled *Noeth*. He said it was a drawing of a friend of his. The *meaning* (or *content*) of the work at first seemed pretty straightforward. We initially discussed it in terms of scale. Why, for instance, did he make it so small? The size clearly lent itself to an intimate reading by the viewer. And what about the support? Why did he put it on a piece of canvas rather than on paper (especially as the canvas wasn't even stretched onto a support)? Why did he leave the plain white gesso ground unworked? Although it was nicely rendered, the work didn't have much impact. The student then told us that this wasn't ink on canvas but blood. Indeed, he had painted the image with his own blood. Suddenly the meaning changed. The intimate scale was now tied to the intimate act of cutting through skin to take one's own blood and the intimate feelings that must have prompted such an act. The piece began to take on a very different narrative meaning that issued from what the image was made of. The student went on to say that this was, in fact, a portrait of a friend of his that had recently been killed when, on September 11, a plane flew into the Pentagon. Our reading of the piece was radically transformed again. The object in front of us was now an act of mourning, a tribute, a political statement, a response to incomprehensible loss. Indeed, the little drawing, which hadn't physically changed at all since our first look, was radically transformed.

One Man's Ceiling Is Another Man's Floor

Clearly, materials are not neutral. They contain meanings, which can be deployed by an artist to support, contradict, or run parallel to a narrative. Indeed, they can control narrative meaning. Chris Ofili's painting of the Virgin Mary was derided by critics and officials, offended by the fact that one of the materials that he used in the work was elephant dung. Like Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, Ofili's *Virgin* became a lightning rod for the forces for and against First Amendment protection of contemporary art practices.

In part, as a result of the controversy, material *became* the narrative content of the painting. For his critics, the dung represented an insult to the subject, the Virgin Mary. However, Ofili, a British artist of Nigerian descent, who began incorporating elephant dung into his work after a trip to Zimbabwe, said that this was a way of literally incorporating Africa into his work. In fact, the artist credited by name the elephants from British zoos that donated their *material*. His *personal narrative* was

a counterpoint to that of his critics. "There's something incredibly simple but incredibly basic about it," Ofili said. "It attracts a multiple of meanings and interpretations."⁸

Material and Process as Meaning

The British sculptor Antony Gormley's *Field for the British Isles*, at the British Museum, was an installation created with approximately forty thousand small terra cotta figures arranged in a tightly packed configuration to cover an entire gallery floor. As with his other *Field* projects, the installation was the result of a collective effort with local communities that shaped the simple figures.

Clay was the only material used in the sculpture, a material with ideal physical properties for simple modeling and for the kind of collective production used to shape the thousands of individual pieces that made up the installation. It is a material most closely associated with the small figurative artifacts of our own ancient history.

The Medium and the Message

If you were to write a description for a doctor of what you ate yesterday, it would probably be a relatively straightforward account in plain language, since your primary goal would be to give the doctor the information she asked for. The language that you chose would be pretty *transparent*: that is, it would make itself invisible to enable you to *communicate* your meaning. It would simply be a vehicle for your message. But let's say you wanted to write a *poem* about food, you would likely choose your words carefully and arrange them to create a structure that did more than just *communicate* meanings. You might want the words to rhyme at the end of each line, for instance. You would probably choose words that were rhythmic and arrange them to follow some kind of metric structure. Perhaps you would try to create connections between what a word *signified* (its meaning) and what it sounded or looked like. The more poetic your language became, the less *transparent* your narrative meaning.

The poetic language you created would take on a life of its own, stand away from a clear narrative, and become more separated from single dictionary meanings. It would take on other meanings through associations created by its structural relation to the other words in your poem.

This example can help you think about the idea of *transparency* in general. For the doctor, you used language as an invisible carrier of meaning. In the poem, you created a more complex language that carried multiple meanings. This poetic language is more *opaque* than the *transparent* language you used with the doctor. Opaque language *covers over* narrative meaning by pointing to itself, while at the same time expanding the possible meanings by the associations it creates. Imagine running water in a creek coming up against a rock and spreading out in many directions.

Although visual language, at its most transparent, can be used to sell products or change someone's political views, our concern is with the *poetic function*. And though historically paintings were often used to convey religious narratives to people who couldn't read (a *communicative function*, which is also *didactic*⁹), the best painters managed to mix the communicative function with the poetic, that is, to *move* viewers by giving them a complex experience, while they also gave them information. Art is at its best when it can be *experienced* on several levels rather than just "gotten," like the punch line of a joke. The *experience* of a complex work of art involves the perception of a complex structure of some kind, rather than an instantaneous *reading*.

In that vein, the novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, addressing an audience at the Folger Theatre¹⁰ in Washington, D.C., made this distinction, "For a journalist," Vargas Llosa explained, "language is an instrument. For a writer, language is an instrument but it is also a goal." This is as true for the artist as it is for the writer.

The Meanings of Transparency and Opacity in Painting

When we speak about transparency in language, we really mean using words in the clearest manner so as not to obscure or overly complicate the message or narrative we are trying to get across. Transparency in painting is a bit different. It refers to the viewer being able to make the actual paint and the surface of the canvas invisible in order to transform it into an illusion. But as with transparent language, this illusion is the carrier of narrative content. To illustrate this, let's imagine two paintings that contain the image of a woman—one is a painting by Vermeer, the other is one of de Kooning's *Woman* paintings.

The painting by Vermeer is more transparent than the de Kooning. For when we look at the Vermeer, there is nothing on the surface that

catches our eye. We look straight through, as if looking through a window, into a three-dimensional space. We don't see any evidence of the artist's hand. It's as if by magic this painting appeared before us, complete and without any traces of its making. The Vermeer completely hides the materials and actions that were deployed on the painting's surface, so that the viewer's eye doesn't linger there.

The de Kooning does something very different. It *foregrounds* the paint and the artist's gestures at the surface of the canvas and stops the viewer's eye from entering into an illusion. The painting is flat! The window has disappeared. What is happening on the surface of the de Kooning is an integral part of the image and, thus, how we *read* it. It marks the place of meaning. Indeed, the image of the woman in the de Kooning is constructed of a jungle of competing physical brush strokes that appear almost to be attacking the very image they are forming. Meaning resides on the surface, where thick brush strokes embody evidence both of an authentic and expressive act of painting and of an attack on the image itself. The viewer might wonder whether the artist is attacking women, conventional narrative painting, or is just having a bad day.

In the case of the Vermeer, the transparent *language* that renders the surface all but invisible gives way completely to the image, so that the image becomes a clear container for a narrative content. We look through the window into the room to construct a meaning from the relationships we see within. In the de Kooning, the surface has barred us from entering an illusionary space. The image, almost invisible, has given way to the surface. The Vermeer is a *transparent* painting, the de Kooning an *opaque* one.

For both painters, language was both instrument and goal. De Kooning's language points away from illusion and toward itself. It exalts in its own expressivity, in the act of its becoming. For Vermeer, language has been perfected in such a way as to vanish from sight, leaving an image so seamless, it might have just fallen from the sky. That isn't to say one is more poetic or artistic than the other, as in the journalist and the poet. For in the visual arts, where meaning is also embodied in a work's materiality, where language itself is material, transparency must be skillfully deployed for the sake of narrative content. And for this kind of painting, the complex meanings are found in the many formal imagistic devices, such as composition, color, line quality, draftsmanship, and the operations of iconography.

Reading Transparent Paintings

The surface of a Vermeer is smooth and has many thin layers of glaze, which make it both reflective and deep. When we look at any painting by Vermeer, we are watching light travel through its many thin transparent layers until it reaches the bright white reflective ground beneath. Here the light makes an about-face and travels back through the same layers, back out of the painting, and to our eyes. Thus, the luminescence of such paintings. What can you infer about a painting whose surface is so invisible that it hides any trace of the hand that produced it? We see first off that the image seems to be more important than the artist or act that created it. It points the viewer's eye away from the surface, away from the artist's act, and toward the image itself.

Thus, we can start here, with the image itself. What kind of space is being created and what is depicted in it? In other words, what is actually *in* the picture? Is there an overall palette? Can we see brush strokes? What kind of a composition are we looking at? How stable is it? Can we see a pattern created by light or color that links figures to objects, or figures to other figures, objects to other objects? Does something dominate because it's centered, or larger, or painted with a color that stands out? What is the figure doing? Are there several figures? How are they arranged? This can go on indefinitely as meanings are discovered through careful looking.

In traditional painting, visual language is constructed out of pigment, painting mediums, the canvas support, along with the way those materials are organized in relation to a pictorial surface and physical support. The laws of physics in relation to the choice of materials—gravity, solubility, fat content of paint, refractive index between pigment and medium, transparency, permanence, and so on—form a resistance to the actions of the painter. The transparent illusionist painter overcomes and resists the presence of the materials for the sake of pure illusion.

Media and Meaning

But painting also can simply be material applied to a surface, and that surface can be just about anything that will receive the material! Here again the material in a sense becomes the narrative, whether cut paper shapes on canvas or collected sequins pinned directly to the wall, whether ink injected underneath someone's skin or spray paint on concrete.

It's the same with sculpture. Imagine a room filled to knee level with moist soil or hundreds of polished white stones placed very close together covering a cathedral floor. Or imagine a large rectangular shape on the floor made with yellow pigment, or the same rectangular shape made with sifted bee pollen, poured wax, thrown lead, coiled ropes, or pools of oil. All of these works foreground material at the expense of narrative image. At this juncture painting and sculpture begin to overlap. Is a flat red pool of liquid a kind of painting on the floor or a sculpture? What about pure blue light on an LED screen?

Low Profile and High Profile

Material actively participates in a work's message. Given the array of potential materials one can employ, the possibilities are limitless. A simple form constructed like a beach ball might be made with flexible steel sheet, paper strips, plastic sheeting, or shredded bamboo—all to very different effects. These are *low-profile* materials. They don't bring with them strong associations but operate primarily as raw material to be transformed. Examples of some other low-profile materials are straw, steel, wood, plaster, clay, and cement.

But what if we construct this ball out of materials like political posters, razor wire, medical tubing, Campbell's soup cans, or yarn that we have unraveled from all of our childhood sweaters? These are *high-profile* materials. High-profile materials, when used in constructed sculptures or collage, maintain much of their original identity.

A sculpture constructed out of standard two-by-fours is read differently from the same form made with pieces of recycled furniture. Consider the shift in meaning when a cameo is constructed out of a carved block of plaster as opposed to a carved aspirin. A portrait made with paint from tubes changes when it's painted with toothpaste. An architectural shelter constructed with lumber differs from one built out of stacked milk crates.

NOTES

1. Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory. An Introduction*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pp. 113–114. For a clear, demystifying overview of some of the most influential theories on the visual arts, this book is mandatory reading.
2. Taylor, Joshua, *Learning to Look: A Handbook for the Visual Arts*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, pp. 51–68.
3. Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing*, British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books Ltd., London, 1972 (based on the BBC television series with John Berger).
4. Sachs, Albie, *Preparing Ourselves for Freedom. Spring Is Rebellious*, original paper prepared for an ANC in-house seminar on culture, ed. Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press, Buchu Books, Cape Town, 1990, pp. 19–28.
5. *Foregrounding*, originally coined by the Russian formalist Roman Jakobson for analyzing literary works by breaking them down into linguistic functions, also can be a useful term for talking about art. We use it to refer to that which stands out as unexpected in an aesthetic system, that is, an artist's general emphasis of one element over others. For instance, if a highly realistic painting of a landscape has a surface that is covered with energetic and thickly gestured brush strokes, the surface is being *foregrounded*. It is going against our expectations for transparent illusion and calling attention to itself. By noticing what is *foregrounded* in a work, especially at the beginning of critique, we can begin to discover the meanings embodied in its formal structuring.
6. It turns out that bulls are colorblind.
7. For an interesting discussion and critique of the idea that a neutral ground for painting is even possible, see Rosalind Krauss's article *The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition*, originally published in *October*, no. 18, Cambridge, Mass., Fall 1981.
8. Vogel, Carol, "Chris Ofili: British Artist Holds Fast to Inspiration," September 28, 1999, "Holding Fast to His Inspiration: An Artist Tries to Keep His Cool in the Face of Angry Criticism," Carol Vogel, *New York Times*, Section E, p. 1, September 28, 1999.
9. The term *didactic* comes from the Greek word *didosko* (*didoskein*), which means *to teach*. Thus, *didactic art* is art whose purpose is to teach—in this case, religious stories from the Bible.
10. Mario Vargas Llosa, a Peruvian novelist, playwright, essayist, journalist, literary critic, and statesman, held an open conversation and read from his work October 14, 2003, at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C.