SWU 252 - Aesthetics for Life
W11: Interpretation and Intentionality

“I wanted to make something that would disappear completely.”
- Gonzalez-Torres

1 Introduction

- “Untitled (Loverboy)” - Felix Gonzalez-Torres (Stokstad & Cothren 2010)
  - Blue paper,
    7.5 (ideal height) x 29 x 23 "
  - Gallery visitors were asked to take a sheet as they walked by
  - The stack of paper gradually decreased to nothing

Q: Art, or not art? Beautiful or not beautiful?

• Question: What is the relationship between the AESTHETIC JUDGEMENT and INTERPRETATION?

• Observation: The act of INTERPRETING artwork allows us to engage our imagination and intellect (cf. Kant’s fourth criterion)

• This allows us to better aesthetically appreciate the object

...but ...what is INTERPRETATION?

• Today: What’s the relationship between INTERPRETATION and INTENTIONALITY?

• Four Approaches to Interpretation
  - H1 The Identity Thesis (Intentionalism)
  - H2 The Intermediate Identity Thesis (Intentionalism)
  - H3 Hypothetical Intentionalism
  - H4 Radical Hypothetical Intentionalism (Anti-Intentionalism)

• These four approaches differ in terms of whether they are...

  1 INTENTIONALIST or ANTI-INTENTIONALIST
    i.e., whether the intention of the artist is relevant to interpretation

  2 MONISTIC or PLURALIST
    i.e., whether there is
    (i) only ONE correct interpretation, or
    (ii) MULTIPLE, mutually (in)consistent (but equally valid) interpretations

Definition: INTERPRETATION

INTERPRETATION is the act of assigning meaning to something (eg., object, a word, a sentence, an action, ...)

• When discussing the meaning of aesthetic/art objects
  
• ... we can think about what the object refers to, or whether it is making a claim (that can be judged TRUE OR FALSE)
2 The Identity Thesis

2.1 The (Strict) Identity Thesis

**Q:** What is the proper meaning/interpretation of a work of art?

**H1: The (Strict) Identity Thesis**

The meaning/interpretation of an art object is the artist’s intentions - i.e., what the artist intends the art object to mean.

- eg., Gonzalez-Torres intended for “Untitled (Loverboy)” to refer to the diminishing condition of his dying lover

- Therefore, that is the meaning of “Untitled (Loverboy)”

- Do you agree with this approach? Disagree? Why?

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**“Untitled (Cat Mug)” (2016)**

- Leagan Moutie

The artist intends for this to represent the social and economic challenges that women throughout history have faced.

...is that the proper interpretation of “Untitled (Cat Mug)”???

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**“Unfriended” (2016)**

- Leagan Moutie

The artist intends for this to represent a claim about the cheapness and fragility of the social connections between human in the electronic age

- $ price = how easy it is to “friend” s.o
- paperclips = how weak the connection is
- the words “Satisfaction is Guaranteed” = ironic statement about this theme

...is this better? Why/Why not?

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**A Problem with the “Strict Identity Thesis”**

- **Observation:** Even if an artist intends to convey a specific message ...they can fail to communicate that message

  - i.e., intentions can fail to be realized\(^1\)

- Consider this analogy from language

  (1) **Context:** Someone asks me where the dean is. The dean has a lot of meetings today, so I try to say “The dean is busy,” but it comes out as:

  “The bean is dizzy.”

- *I* mean that the dean is busy...
  ...but is that what my sentence means? Most people would say “no.”

- Why would the interpretation of art be different?

- **Q:** What determines whether the intended message is successfully communicated or not?

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\(^{1}\)In this context “realize” means “make real.”
• **Q:** How can humans successfully convey messages?

  – One standard way is via conventionalized **SYMBOLS**
    i.e., agreed-upon (“conventionalized”)
    mappings between **FORM** and **MEANING** (“symbols”)

  
  \[ \text{[kæt]} \text{“cat”} \leftrightarrow \text{🐱} \]

  All English speakers have (unofficially) agreed that
  this **strings of sounds**, refers to this **particular concept**

  
  \[ \text{[ʃa]} \text{“chat”} \leftrightarrow \text{🐱} \]

  All French speakers have (unofficially) agreed that
  this **strings of sounds**, refers to this **particular concept**

  – Some symbols are **ARBITRARY**;
    the \( \langle \text{form, meaning} \rangle \) mapping must be learned/memorized

    eg., “cat,” “chat,” \( \models \pi \)

  – Other symbols are **ICONIC**;
    the meaning can be predicted from the form

    eg., 🍵, 🖤, 🐱

  – So what’s the problem with **Untitled (Cat Mug)**?

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**“Untitled (Cat Mug)” (2016)**
- Leagan Mouie

The artist intends for this to represent the social and economic challenges that women throughout history have faced.

It’s not clear how anything in this image arbitrarily, or iconically, symbolizes the intended meaning above!

2.2 The Intermediate Identity Thesis

**Q:** What is the **proper meaning/interpretation** of a work of art?

**H2: The Intermediate Identity Thesis**

The meaning/interpretation of an art object
is the artist’s **realized** intentions,
where the meaning of the intended message
is expressed/realized with conventionalized symbols

eg., Gonzalez-Torres intended for “Untitled (Loverboy)” to refer to the diminishing condition of his dying lover

the diminishing pile of blue paper iconically symbolizes this

• Therefore, that is the meaning of “Untitled (Loverboy)”

**Q:** What do you think of this approach? Agree/Disagree?
Q: Can you think of any problems for this approach?

- **Stecker 2010**: If art consists of symbols
  ...and symbols are themselves associated with meaning...
  ...then isn’t the meaning present whether
  the artist intended it or not?

(2) **Context**: Someone asks me where the dean is. The dean has a lot of meetings today, so I try to say “*The dean is busy,*** but it comes out as:

  “*The bean is dizzy.*”

→“*The bean is dizzy*** has a meaning,
  even if I didn’t intend to express it

Why would ART be different?

### 2.3 Hypothetical Intentionalism

H3: Hypothetical Intentionalism

The meaning/interpretation of an art object

- **is a HYPOTHESIS ABOUT THE ARTIST’S REALIZED INTENTIONS,**
  compatible with

  (i) the context of creation
  (ii) the formal properties of the artwork
    (including artistic conventions at the time)

- **Gonzalez-Torres** “*Untitled (Lover-boy)*” consists of a diminishing pile of blue paper

- **This can be interpreted as an iconic symbolization of the diminishing condition of his dying lover**

- Therefore, this is a valid meaning for “*Untitled (Loverboy)*” (whether or not it was intended by the artist)

**Alternate Interpretation:**

- The diminishing pile of blue paper iconically symbolizes the melting of the icecaps, due to human-induced global warming
- *(Lover-boy)* in the title symbolizes the careless nature with which humans treat the earth
- These symbols are compatible with the context of creation (New York, 1990s)
- Therefore a valid interpretation of “*Untitled (Lover-boy)*” is a warning about environmental change - even though this is not what the artist intended

**The Monistic/Pluralistic Distinction**

- **MONISTIC APPROACHES** - allow for only one valid interpretation
- **PLURALISTIC APPROACHES** - allow for multiple (possibly inconsistent) interpretations

  - The Identity Thesis (H1) and Intermediate Identity Thesis (H2),
    are **MONISTIC** approaches - they allow for only one meaning

  - Hypothetical Intentionalism (H3) is a **PLURALISTIC** approach
    There can be multiple, valid interpretations of an artwork
Although **Hypothetical Intentionalism** allows for multiple interpretations to be valid, these have to be possible interpretations of the actual artist. eg., If I know that my three-year old niece was the creator of a piece of art, I can assign possible interpretations only if those interpretations are consistent with what she might have intended.

This is what differentiates **Hypothetical Intentionalism** from **Radical Hypothetical Intentionalism**.

### 2.4 Radical Hypothetical Intentionalism

**H4: Radical Hypothetical Intentionalism**
The meaning/interpretation of an art object is a **hypothetical artist’s realized intentions**, compatible with:

(i) the context of creation

(ii) the formal properties of the artwork (including artistic conventions at the time)

→ Multiple interpretations are valid; although these have to be possible intentions of a hypothetical artist

- Unlike **Hypothetical Intentionalism**, interpretations using **Radical Hypothetical Intentionalism** aren’t constrained by the need to be compatible with what we know about the actual artist.

- It is not even necessary to know who the artist is.

eg., If I am confronted with an art object, I can imagine a possible artist, and then consider their possible intentions. If my interpretation is compatible with the context of creation, and the formal properties of the artwork, then these interpretations are valid.

**The Intentionalist/Anti-Intentionalist Distinction**

- **INTENTIONALIST** - the artist’s intentions constrain how we can validly interpret the artwork

- **ANTI-INTENTIONALIST** - the artist’s intentions don’t constrain how we can validly interpret the artwork

**The Identity Thesis (H1) and Intermediate Identity Thesis (H2)**, are **INTENTIONALIST** approaches.
• They say the artist’s intentions (realized or not) are how we should interpret the artwork

• Hypothetical Intentionalism (radical or not) (H3) are ANTI-INTENTIONALIST approaches

• They say the actual artist’s intentions are irrelevant to how we should interpret the artwork

• What is a valid interpretation of...

Native American war headdresses as a fashion accessory?

• The man on the right (“the artist”) doesn’t intend to be insulting...

• ... but his costume is very offensive to the man on the left

• Q: Is the man’s choice of “fashion” racist/offensive, or not?

  – According to THE STRICT IDENTITY THESIS?
  – According to THE INTERMEDIATE IDENTITY THESIS?
  – According to HYPOTHETICAL INTENTIONALISM?
  – According to RADICAL HYPOTHETICAL INTENTIONALISM?

INSTAGRAM HOMEWORK - INTERPRETING ART
Find or create, and post some art, and provide an interpretation for its meaning based on either

(i) The Strict Identity Thesis,

(ii) The Intermediate Identity Thesis,

(iii) Hypothetical Intentionalism, or

(iv) Radical Hypothetical Intentionalism

Justify a categorization of your analysis as (i), (ii), (iii) or (iv) by making reference to their definitions.

Don’t forget to CITE the source of the art!

References
