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How can artists use the audience's perception of materials to charm the senses?

There are many ways artists can provoke reactions from their audience. However, in this assignment, I will be exploring the ways artists use the viewer's perception of material to trick their minds into believing the work is something different to what it is. This can be shown through work that is an illusion, or by tricking the viewer into thinking the object or material is an entirely different composition. I will look at how tactile knowledge assists the viewer to develop an idea of what the artwork is before examining the work more closely. I will also discuss Julia Kristeva's theory (1989) of abjection and how this can prompt a response from the viewer. The ambivalent feelings expressed by this concept are interesting because the artist has the ability to control the viewer's emotions in a way that means they feel two emotions that contradict each other. Lastly, I have examined Lacan's philosophy of 'the real' (in Buchanan, 2018) and how the viewer's experience with this idea can create strong reactions to a piece of artwork. I have used literature to present the similarities and differences in each piece of artwork and how these theories can be more relevant to individual pieces of work. From this, I have seen the number of ways artists can charm the viewers giving them a connection to the artwork, through their interaction and responses.

Charm can be defined as, 'a quality that makes you like or feel attracted to someone or something' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). Charm has a deeper meaning than appearance, it is the ability some have to make others feel special in their presence and create an instant connection (Tracy & Arden, 2006). It can provoke us to respond emotionally and instinctively and is often referred to when discussing the interaction between people in social settings. However, in this assignment, I will refer to charm as the feeling as a response to how artists encourage interaction to be between people and objects.

The feeling of being charmed is similar to enchantment; which is being drawn to something because of its attractive appearance (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). However, it is also described as the thought of someone or something being under the influence of magic, or attracted to a magical quality (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). The author Bettelheim shows that fairy tales are used to help children understand real-life problems that are explained in a way a child thinks (1978). This means that portraying a problem through a fictional character helps the child to understand real-life problems better than if they were explained in adult terms. Characters and objects in these tales

symbolise problems and solutions, and the children are in a safe place when they are learning about them. Being in a safe environment means they can understand the stories without the worry of their reality being impacted by the characters. Learning about these problems from a young age means that they are more equipped to deal with these problems again as an adult, as they are better at problem-solving and being able to decipher what is real and not. So, when a viewer experiences a piece of work that appears to be an illusion, they may experience enchantment with the work and would try to understand it better. The engagement with the artwork can leave the viewer feeling like they have a connection with the piece or the artist, and this can leave an impact on them.

A reaction is 'behaviour, a feeling or an action that is a direct result of something else' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). This means that when an audience is reacting to a piece of artwork, they can do this by emotional or physical means. A physical response could be described as an 'embodied experience' (Hubard, 2007) this is described as a physical response to art. For instance, this could be when a viewer re-enacts a performance that they have seen or draws in the air the brushstrokes of a painting, helping them to understand the process of the work. Another physical response could be the audience crying from the pain they see in an image or 'she recognises the pain the wounds suggest and instantly flinches', flinching from the fear of something in a sculpture (Hubard, 2007). These reactions can help the viewer to understand the artwork on a deeper understanding, realising what the work represents.

It is suggested that emotional reactions can also be prompted by artwork. One example of an emotional response could be when an image depicts a scenario that the viewer can relate to and so they feel like they can resonate with the work or feel understood. This reaction to the work can make the viewer feel like they have a connection to the work or to the artist. A study showed that when a group of visitors studied 'Ladder to the Moon' (O'Keeffe, 1958) they felt wonderment and nostalgia. The study (Tinio & Gartus, 2018) also showed they felt wonderment and interest in response to Grosvenor's 'Tenerife' sculpture (1966).

Marcel Duchamp showed he strongly believed that the viewer plays a vital role in their response to the artwork 'not performed by the artist alone' (Khanacademy.org, 2023). He explained that the viewer's interaction with the work gave it contact with 'the external world' and thus the audience

adds to the creativity by interpreting the work and giving it importance. Marcel would often create work that would invite the audience to interact with the work or ask them to follow instructions on how to experience the work.

I decided to write about the viewer's response to their interaction with the object because I found people's reactions to my work, and my reactions to other artists' work very interesting. I think it represents how artists have the ability to play with the audience's emotions through material and perception and this can be playful or meaningful. It allows them to convey an idea or feeling through their work, or create a sense of illusion. I recently created a piece of jewellery predominantly made from glass (see figure 1), where the piece draped over the shoulder and around the neck. I found there were a variety of different responses to the piece, which were mostly prompted by the material that I used.



Figure 1- *Glass jewellery*, Ashton, 2022

Glass is not typically used in jewellery or as a wearable material and so their reactions may be provoked by their previous interaction with jewellery. This set of assumptions for example the weight, look and feel of the material derives from childhood as learnt behaviour and responses to objects could be linked to the notion of a schema. Piaget's (Brain & Mukherji, 2005) concept of schema is a child's cognitive development to understand their physical and social environment. The schema is developed through the stage of adaptation which is made through two processes assimilation and accommodation. This is when the child experiences something new; through their interaction, they gain information known as accommodation. In this context, equilibrium is when the new information fits the current knowledge. Therefore, when a child is young, they may be taught

that glass is dangerous. This information is learnt and the child is often cautious when handling objects made from glass. A person who has developed this schema may then be naturally unsure about the concept of wearing glass jewellery. This could be an example of Piaget's stage of disequilibrium (Sanghvi, 2020), as their knowledge of the material tells them to be cautious; however, the piece is designed to be worn and in contradiction, to be worn around a vulnerable part of the body. This means that in my work I was able to prompt a reaction from the viewer by confusing their perception of the material and using it differently.

It is important to understand material properties to interact with our surroundings (Takahashi & Tan, 2019). Through our senses such as touch and sight, we learn about the material. This allows us to imagine how something will feel without touching it, for example, sandpaper feels rough and silk is soft. This understanding of materials can also help to take action if needed. For instance, when driving, if there is ice on the surface of the road, the driver may slow down in anticipation of skidding. Another example of this could be our knowledge to tell if a fruit is ripe enough or if bread is stale based on our tactile response and subtle visual cues (Fleming, 2014). Artists can take advantage of this knowledge to use the viewer's perception of materials to trick them into believing the work is made from one material but is made from another. An example of an artist who attempts to create artwork that may evoke a reaction is Dylan Martinez. He sculpts hyper-realistic forms with molten glass in his series 'H₂O/SiO₂' (Martinez, 2020) (see figure 2). Glass is formed into the shape of plastic bags holding water, tied at the top in a knot. The bubbles in the water and the waterdrops on the sides of the bag help bring the bags to life, he states that adding these small details convinces the viewer that the bags are what they seem.

In his work, Martinez (2022) explores the viewer's boundaries of perception by looking at themes of space, light manipulation and the properties of glass. By combining the themes, he can create work that makes the viewer question and recognise the difference between reality and illusion. Martinez's (2022) interest in perception is due to his colour blindness, he believes that this deficit enables him to see and experience his environment differently. He notes, 'our vision has the greatest effect on our understanding of the world' (Martinez, 2022) this shows that his inability to see colours correctly affects his understanding of the world. So, by creating work that alters the viewer's perception, it reflects his own altered perception of his environment. There are two sides to the work, what the viewer thinks the work is, a plastic bag with water, and what the work is, a sculpture made from glass.



Figure 2- *H₂O/Si₂O*, Martinez, 2020

Trickery in design may be how we can actually experience a moment of magic in a piece of art, making the artist a magician or trickster. In the book 'Tricky Design', Cameron Tonkinwise states that magic is when a person is 'entertaining deception' (Tonkinwise, in Fisher & Gamman, 2019, p.84), and the magic act is the performance. He explains that the magic performance is a trick, and by distracting the audience, they can be manipulated by the magician's technical skill. Therefore, if we say the artist is the magician and the piece of work is the trick, their technical skill is what has been developed through their practice. The difference between the artist and the magician is that the audience watches the magicians perform however, they only see the final finished piece from the artist. Despite this, the audience can still witness the 'unexpected conclusion' (Tonkinwise, in Fisher & Gamman, 2019, p.84), and feel as though they have been tricked. Though the magician's use of mechanics and sleight of hand movements to manipulate the viewer to believe what they are seeing, the artist has too learnt ways of distraction and how materials behave to create an illusion in their final outcome. These mechanics allow the viewer to question what they are seeing and how it was made.

Jon Kolko (2011) develops this idea by stating that the development of the work is a process that is usually not seen by the audience and cannot be seen. The audience cannot see how the ideas are developed as these are done privately, through thinking 'in the head' or through various drawings and sampling that sometimes only make sense to the artist (Kolko, 2011). How the physical work is produced is something the audience does not see, nor do they see the time spent mastering the skills and knowledge learnt from immersing themselves into their practice. This means that when the work is made effortlessly the audience is charmed and only responds to the final product. They are left to wonder how the artist created the piece, and if they saw the processes that went into making the work their response to the final product may be altered as the magic is taken away from them.

Another artist who explores trickery in design is Mona Hatoum. She created *Socle du Monde* (1992-93) (see figure 3) after being inspired by the industrial forms shown in the work of Eva Hesse (White Cube Gallery, 2022) the cube is made from steel and is covered in millions of iron filings attached by magnets that are placed on the inside surface of the cube. The patterns and textures of the filings, make the cube seem as though it is covered in fabric or fur-like material. The magnetic quality of the filings means they constantly change and reorder, adding to the illusion of the soft material, as though it flows with the movement of the room. The movement of the filings can prompt the viewer to experience magic in her work as they may notice the slow movement on the surface of the cube but not be able to understand how it is moving. This is because the viewer cannot see the magnets on the inside of the cube, so they do not know the mechanics of the trick she has created. The subtle changes in the material allow her to demonstrate instability and displacement that show her experiences in exile. This demonstrates that she is able to use the material to represent her feelings but also provoke a response from the viewer who, at first glance at her work, does not know her background. The tactile appearance of the material is intriguing and makes the viewer want to touch it as this is a way to gain more information about the piece of work. The material looks soft and the viewer would expect it to feel soft too, so they would be shocked if the iron filings were hard or potentially sharp. This shows that the material is deceptive and the viewer's perception of the work can contradict the reality of the artwork.

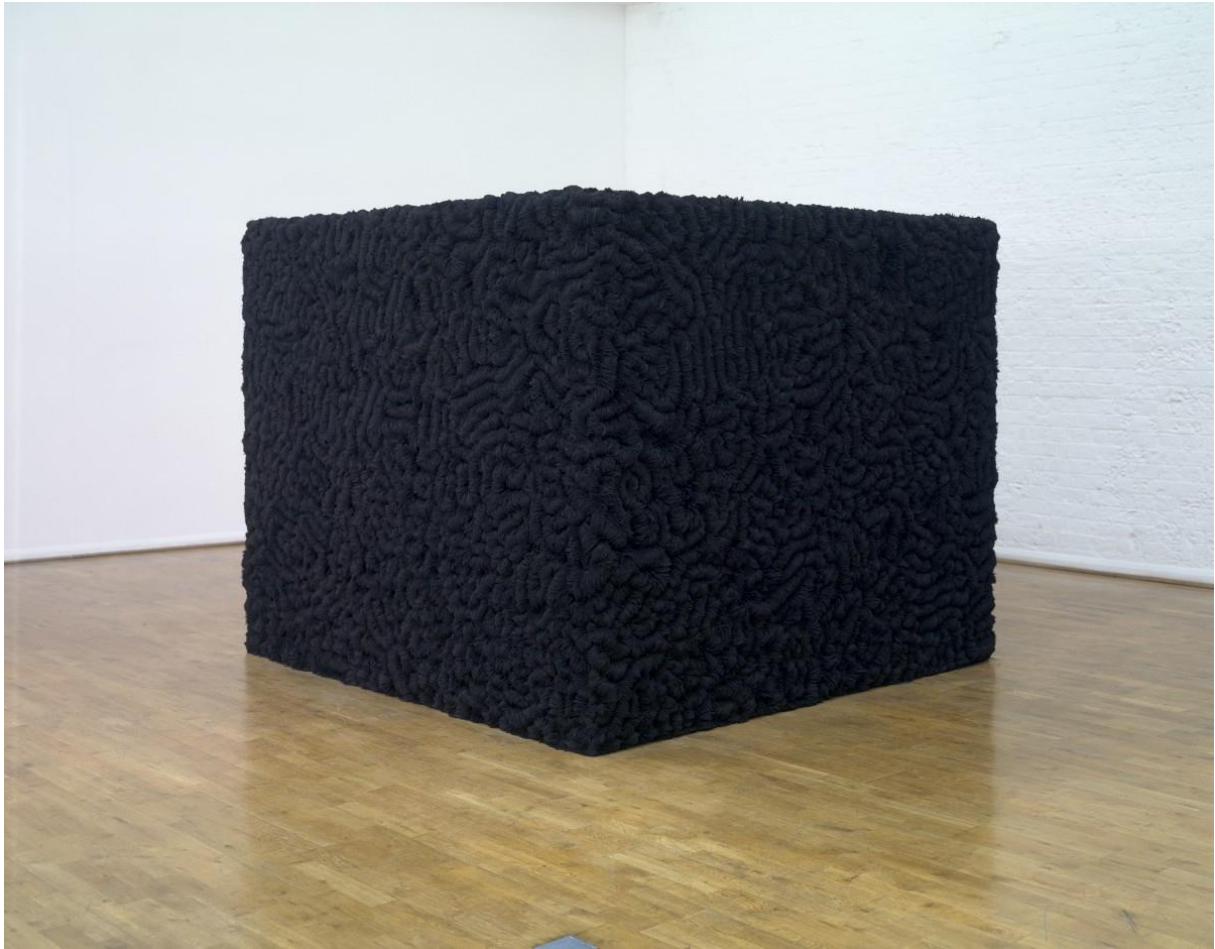


Figure 3- *Socle Du Monde*, Hatoum, 1992-93

The fur-like quality of the material can make some viewers feel uncomfortable as there is an ethical dilemma surrounding the production of real animal fur. The texture and appearance of Hatoum's work (1992-93), in particular, are very similar to that of the material astrakhan which has more extreme ethics concerning its production. Astrakhan is a type of wool taken from new-born or foetal Karakul lamb, that has a looped tight curled surface with a slight sheen (The Dreamstress, 2012). It is suggested that the most wanted type of wool, is from a lamb fifteen to thirty days from being born, meaning the ewe and foetus are killed in order to harvest the wool from the lamb. It is also said that stillborn lambs or ones that die a few days after being born are also used to produce the wool but the younger the lamb the better the curls and sheen of the wool (The Dreamstress, 2012). Therefore, connotations linked with this material can create a sense of unease or disturbance.

Unease is an interesting response to explore when looking at responses as there are various emotions attached such as fear, anxiety and disgust. These themes introduce Kristeva's theory

(1982) of abjection. In Julia Kristeva's book 'Powers of Horrors' (1982), she explains what abjection means and how it can be experienced. She states that abjection is not a physical object but a feeling. This is a feeling of being drawn to something but also repulsed. She uses the analogy of drinking warm milk (Kristeva, 1982, p.3). The taste of milk is what is inviting, however, when the skin from the milk touches your lip, you are instantly repulsed. Kristeva describes the revulsion as a physical reaction, gagging, stomach-turning and queasiness. This shows that the abject is not the object, the milk, but the feeling as a reaction. Kristeva continues to state that after the experience you remove yourself from the object 'spit yourself out', and at the same time establish yourself, now you are experiencing yourself anew. This could demonstrate that since the act of revulsion, everything is now different, and you are a new version of yourself. Kathleen Ryan and Marc Quinn both express ideas of abjection in their sculptures.

In her series 'Bad Fruit' (2022), Kathleen Ryan creates large-scale sculptures of rotting fruit inspired by the object's lifespan and its relationship with nature. She portrays the fruit decaying, from a combination of found and made materials. She sculpts the form of the fruit and beads the surfaces with precious gemstones, including quartz, agate and glass as well as many other materials. The gemstones are attached to the sculpture with steel nails and pins. At first glance, the viewer may be shocked at how realistic and revolting the mould looks, as the colour and patterns she creates are very realistic. The technique of beading very small and unevenly shaped stones means she is able to capture a very high level of detail and recreate the textures of fruit and mould. The colours and tones of the stones help give the powdery look of the mould and in turn, help to trick the viewer into thinking that sculptures are what they seem. At first glance, they do not appear to have the intended appearance of a gemstone and thus making the sculptures seem more repulsive. As the viewer continues to look at them, however, the beaded texture draws the viewer in to look closer. When they study the sculptures closely, they can see the gemstones that decorate the fruit and this charms the viewer as they are no longer repulsed. Therefore, this shows how the viewer experiences abjection, they are repulsed by the mouldy look of the sculptures but at the same time when looked at closely are attracted and mesmerised by the beautiful gemstones. Similarly, a viewer can look into a window of a jewellery shop can be fascinated by all of the types of gemstones and materials used. The viewer is then put into the position of becoming anew, as they may no longer be able to see the sculptures as mouldy fruit. They are distracted by the texture of the gemstones, or they can see both the mouldy fruit and the gemstones but are charmed at the trick the artist has created.



Figure 4- *Bad Melon (Double Rainbow)*, Ryan, 2022



Figure 5- *Bad Melon (Close image)*, Ryan, 2022

In 1991, Marc Quinn created the first sculpture of his series 'Self' a group of self-portraits (Quinn, 2022). To create the pieces, he made a mould of his head and used ten pints of his own blood to cast the sculptures in. The sculptures represented dependency as at the time he created the first one Quinn was an alcoholic. His dependency on alcohol was represented in the work depending on its need of being kept refrigerated to keep its appearance. His blood is used as the material signified both his emotional state at the time, as well as the work being made from his body. After this, he recreated the piece every five years showing him ageing and changing as time passes by.



Figure 6- *Self*, Quinn, 1991

Just like Kathleen Ryan's sculptures, Quinn's (1991) work also displays themes of abjection, however, in Quinn's work the balance of attraction and repulsion is reversed and it can work both ways. The viewer's initial response to the work could be that they are curious to look at the work and want to see what the meaning of it is. After learning the sculpture is made from the artist's blood they may be repulsed by the work. In their research, Haidt, McCauley and Rozin found that there are seven elements that can provoke disgust, these are, 'food, animals, body products, sex, body envelope violations, death and hygiene' (Haidt et al., 1994). Of the seven elements, four have strong connotations with blood and so the response to the blood in the sculpture could be disgust. Haidt et al., (1994) continue to state that all seven elements have a commonality of mortality and so the emotion of disgust can be seen as self-defence. On the other hand, some of the viewers may find the use of blood to be an interesting choice. Not only is the sculpture a real-life replica of the artist, but it is also made from his body and so is a portrait made entirely of himself. The notion of using his blood can spark the viewer to question the work and how he came about using his own blood as this is not a common technique. It could be compared to Damien Hirst (1965) who uses the cadavers of animals to spark a response from the audience as there is a strong argument about the ethics of his work (Mitchell, 2016). In Quinn's work (1991), the argument of ethics does not apply as he uses his own blood, but the use of the blood does provoke a reaction. The curiosity the audience feels can charm them, so they may not like the material that the work is made from but they can appreciate the work and its meaning intended by the artist.

Kathleen Ryan's work (2022) is another example where the artist is able to use the viewer's perceived idea of the work and shock the viewer with the truth of how it has been made. The shocked reaction emphasises Tonkinwise's idea that the artist is a magician and their artwork is their trick. Yet with Marc Quinn's sculptures, this does not apply in the same way as his sculptures do not look like another type of material. Therefore, the viewer cannot assume what the material is at first glance as there is no indication of what the material could be or that the object is something different. This assumption means that the artist has not intentionally performed a trick for the audience as it was not his intention to mislead the viewers to think that the work is made from something completely different.

The viewer's shocked reaction to the artwork can be explained by Lacan's theory of 'the real' (in Buchanan, 2018). Lacan explains that there are three 'orders' to structuring human existence, these are, the symbolic, the imaginary and the real (Buchanan, 2018). The symbolic order is the reality that

'gives all phenomena their specific meanings' (Buchanan, 2018), and therefore if something can be imagined, it can be represented. Lacan (in Buchanan, 2018) explains that the ego matures when it is subjected to the symbolic order and psychosis occurs when this process fails and the ego is left in the imaginary order. The imaginary order is also denoted as the mirror stage, as this is the sense that 'I' is an image seen in the child's reflection and so a 'product of the imaginary' (Buchanan, 2018). This imaginary order has an ignorant state of mind that is unaware of the limitations of 'the real', thus meaning it is creative but also disturbing, hence Lacan's suggestions of psychosis (in Buchanan, 2018). 'The real' is described as the sense that is impossible to imagine and therefore, rejects representation. If the sense cannot be represented it cannot fit into the symbolic order. On reflection, 'the real' is conflicting with reality and is shocking when 'the real' is encountered 'the real is always traumatic' (Buchanan, 2018). 'The real' is anything that has not been imagined and so in a circumstance where the real becomes a reality, it is shocking.

An example of 'the real' being experienced could be compared to the 9/11 attack on the twin towers (BBC, 2001). In their article, Sass (2003) states that the towers represented power and strength and so for anything to happen to them or the people working there would be impossible. The author continues to suggest that on the morning of the attack, there could have been some people from inside the towers who noticed the planes as specs in the distance, but like normal would just recognise them as planes and nothing out of the ordinary. As the planes got closer and became clearer, they could have even had a moment of pleasure watching them until the devastating realisation of what was happening became their reality and the aftermath of the event. This is the moment when 'the real' has taken place, 'when distant, surveyable reality turns into a threatening, unknowable real' (Sass, 2003). This example does not mean all experiences of the real are tragic, it represents the unimaginable happening.

When the viewers learn that Kathleen Ryan's sculptures (2022) are made from gemstones and other materials they are experiencing 'the real' as this is something they would not have imagined the work to have been made from. This is also relevant for the viewers looking at Dylan Martinez's work 'H₂O/SiO₂' (2020), as the bags of water are so realistic, the reality that they are made from glass is shocking.

I have also experienced ‘the real’ when interacting with an exhibition of work by Bonnie Mustoe-Whitehill (2022). At her exhibition, I learnt that her work ‘Please Touch’ (2022) (see figure 7) was about exploring materials and visuo-tactility. This is the idea of believing what you think the material will feel like based on your material understanding and perception (Mustoe-Whitehill, 2022).



Her exhibition consisted of a round black tray that contained several objects made from a variety of materials and colours. The pieces were cast seeds, vegetables and fruit, however, none of the pieces resembled these objects as they had either been dissected into parts or rearranged to create new forms. The materials that she used included jesmonite, latex, glass, foam glass and precious metals. All of these materials have different tactile qualities, but the finishes of the material and the way they were displayed meant it was difficult to decipher what they were. My experience of 'the real' was when I picked up one of the pieces assuming it was glass. When I picked it up, I was shocked to realise it was made from latex. I had anticipated the object to be a solid piece of glass so I picked it

with the impression it would be heavier. To my surprise, it was very light which made me jump and my hand to move quicker than I expected. Even though I was shocked that the material was not what I had perceived I was amused by my reaction and felt charmed by the work. I felt like I had experienced both 'the real' and the trickery when engaging with the artist's work.

Artists are given the ability to explore the emotions of the viewer through their reactions to the artwork. These reactions allow the artist to gain a deeper understanding of their own work as well as understanding the work of other artists. How the viewer responds to the artwork is individual and personal, as these reactions can depend on emotions such as surprise and fear. Using knowledge of the material by the viewer can help the artist to make something that will trick the viewer so they can experience a moment of magic. These moments make the viewer feel like they have been enchanted by the artist and are charmed by the artwork. This charm leads the viewer to think they have a connection with the work as they have had a memorable interaction with the piece. Responses such as abjection (Kristeva, 1998) and the shock of 'the real' (Lacan in Buchanan, 2018) can leave the viewer a sense of being charmed after their initial realisation and understanding of what the artwork is about. Therefore, the viewer plays a vital role in any interaction with artwork as without the viewer, these reactions would not be captured and be recognised that such reactions are timeless. This can be illustrated through the artwork referenced in this assignment, from Marc Quinn (1991) to Kathleen Ryan (2022). My own personal experiences with abjection (Kristeva, 1983) and 'the real' (Lacan in Buchanan, 2017) have led me to feel and understand the abstract concept of being charmed. Artists informed by these concepts can use this knowledge to create artwork that endeavours to use the audience's perception of materials to charm the senses.

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