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Proposed question for Independent Project: How does synaesthesia impact on an
artist's way of seeing the world?

In this essay I will be exploring the three key words of **form**, **sense** and **perception**.

I will be considering the work of Clive Bell, George Berkeley and Plato.

I will be using research from journals and books to help explore these key words further within a contextual art practice.

Form is defined as “to begin to exist or to make something begin to exist: to make something into a particular shape: to make or be something: If separate things form, they come together to make a whole” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). Form within the context of this assignment will be considered in terms of to make or be something; the concept of creating a form within art and design practice and what that means.

Clive Bell originally referred in 1919, to art as a significant form, discussing it in terms of its visual qualities, such as certain combinations of lines and colors which arouse the “aesthetic emotion”. (Zeki, 2013). These key concepts Bell determined as responsible for creating significant form and thereby forming pattern. This is supported by McLaughlin who argues that “significant form is these elements seen as visual pattern, rather than seen as representations of the ex-ternal world” (McLaughlin, 1977). Form, as defined above, is considered pattern rather than an accurate representation, meaning that the viewer of art should take the piece at face value, to feel the emotions from what they see at that moment and not what they presume it to be.

Plato’s philosophical views were the opposite. He believed that forms in the physical world were imperfect replicas of the true, non-material forms accessible in a higher plain such as a heaven. For example, it would be possible to try to replicate or

manifest beauty in all things but it would never achieve perfection. He believed that it was important to discuss intellectually and theorise to attempt to attain the full knowledge of true form. By engaging with art and considering its purpose and what it represented, the observer would promote a more moral and higher understanding of its meaning as opposed to being misled by its superficial aspects of it just being a copy of its divine form.

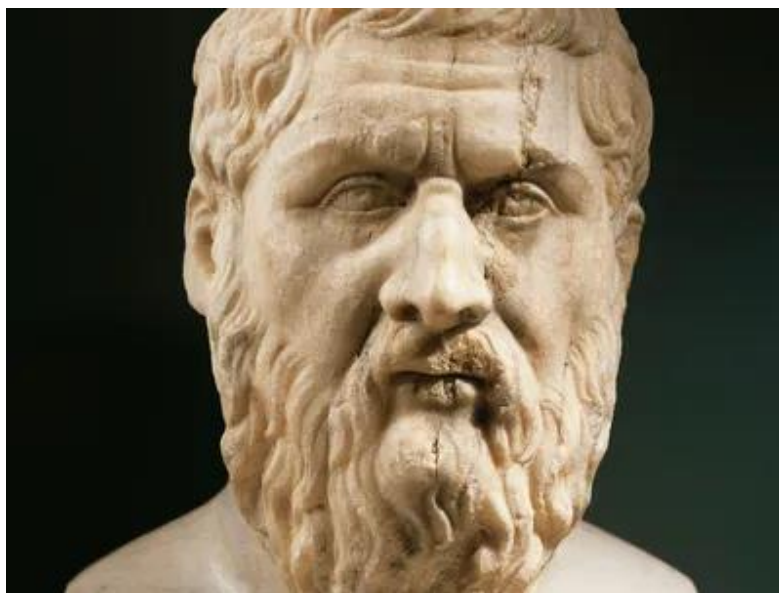


Figure – 1. Marble bust of Plato from an original of the 4th century B.C.

Sense is defined as “an ability to understand, recognize, value, or react to something, especially any of the five physical abilities to see, hear, smell, taste, and feel (Cambridge Dictionary,2024). Sense within the context of this assignment will be considered in terms of the intersensory interpretations of synaesthesia, a condition where one sense can react as and with another sense simultaneously.

Synaesthesia is a rare condition with only 0.05% of births being affected and this is more prevalent in females (Simner et al., 2006, p.1024). Not everyone experiences the same variant of the condition. A word may evoke a colour, or a sound and a number may be seen as a colour or a particular size.

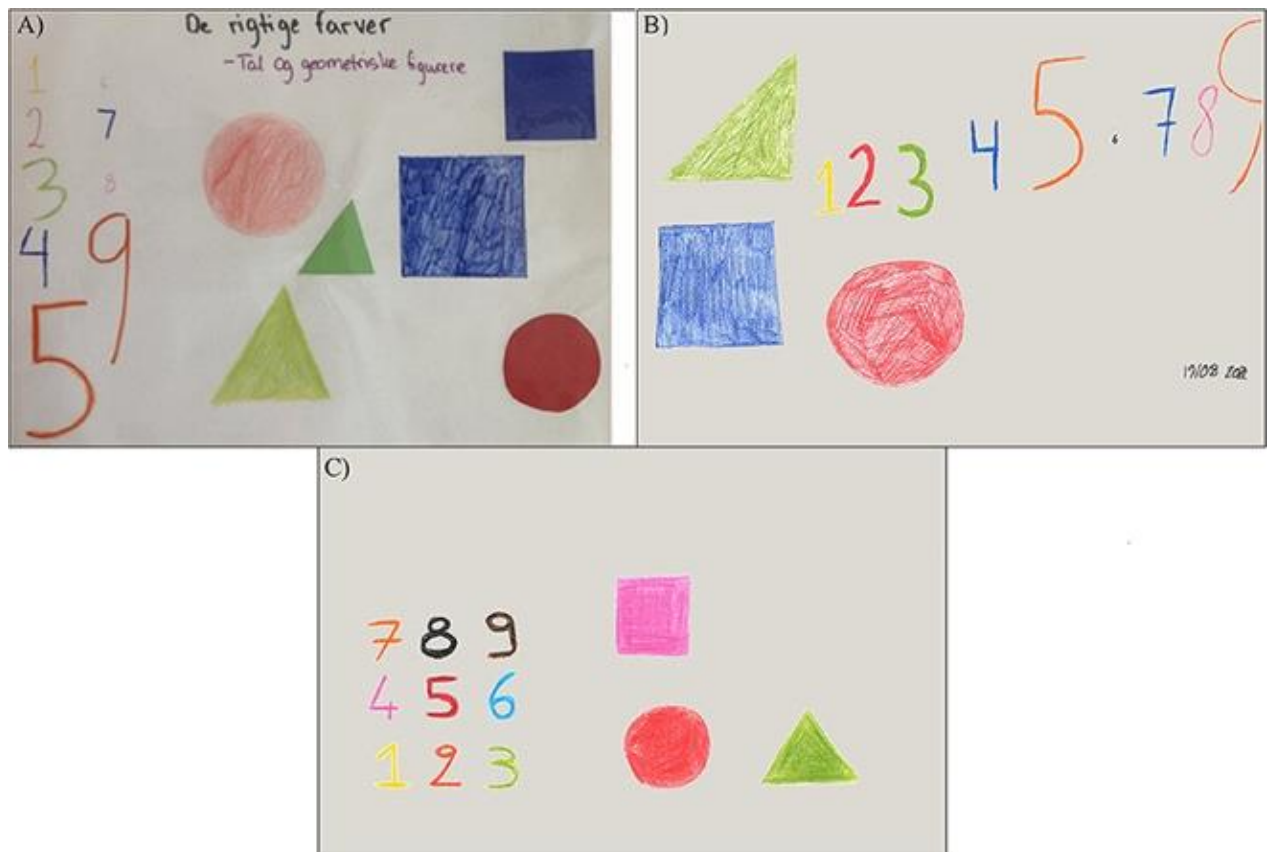


Figure - 2. Synesthesia for numbers and shapes.

For those who have the ability to see, hear, taste, smell or feel the sensations of synaesthesia they are unaware that these feelings or abilities are unusual. It is only during conversations with others that these traits become a realisation of uniqueness. (Duffy, 2021). These feelings were true of artist Sarah Kraning. When she shared her perception of sounds with other people, she was often met with blank

stares or dismissive comments about her imagination. When she was seven, Kraning asked her mother about the sparkles she saw in the music of a Disney song. She was surprised when her mother said she saw nothing at all. This reaction made her realise that her what she experienced was different to other people. Following similar reactions from other people, she began to think that there was something wrong with her and eventually stopped talking about her experiences altogether. After many years, and many tests for ASD, she eventually found out what her condition was during a college lecture on neuroscience. She uses her synaesthetic experiences to create art by painting live during musical events in front of the audience.

Ward, Thompson-Lake, Ely and Kaminski's study (2008) research suggests that there is a link between synaesthesia and creative people in many art forms. Composers such as Messian and Scriabin along with artists Hockney and Kandinsky.



Figure – 3. Composition viii – Wassily Kandinsky

Perception is defined as “a belief or opinion, often held by many people and based on how things seem: the quality of being aware of things through the physical senses, especially sight:” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). Perception in the context of this assignment will be considered in terms of the individual belief of how things appear through the physical senses.

It can be questioned whether perception is predetermined at birth or if influences such as family, country of birth, age or status change the outlook. Beliefs and opinions of children are influenced by their parents, siblings and peers. This is how a sense of the world is formed. Repetition reinforces these ideologies. If a visit to the museum is a weekly occurrence, looking at the same piece of art with the same people and points of view this will influence what is believed to be true. The

receptors in the brain create a connection path that seals that idea as a learned behaviour.

In February 2015 a photograph of a dress posted on social media caused a major debate across the internet questioning the colour of the garment; was it gold and white or blue and black? It turned out that the original dress was blue and black.



Figure 4 - Remember? (Slate, 2017)

Research by Wallisch (2017) determined that before 2015 scientists believed that they understood colour vision, but they did not understand why this dress had been perceived as differing colours by the public. It is now understood that as the brain

registered the image it had assumed the conditions of the lighting that the image had been taken in. The recognition of colour is dependent on not only what the viewer sees, but also the positioning and the source of the light. Daylight, artificial light and shadows all influence the perception of the image. People who are more active during the day would subconsciously assume it was taken in daylight. Others who are more active at night and spend more time on their mobile phone would perceive it as being taken under artificial light.

Artists use visual tricks to create art that can be interpreted in more than one way. This is true with Rubins Vase. The image is an example of bistable perception, this means that our perceptual experience continuously alternates when an ambiguous or rivalrous stimulus is observed (Mamassian, Goutcher, 2005,7). The figure shows a vase which has been drawn using silhouettes of profile faces thus allowing the viewer to see an alternating view of a vase and faces.

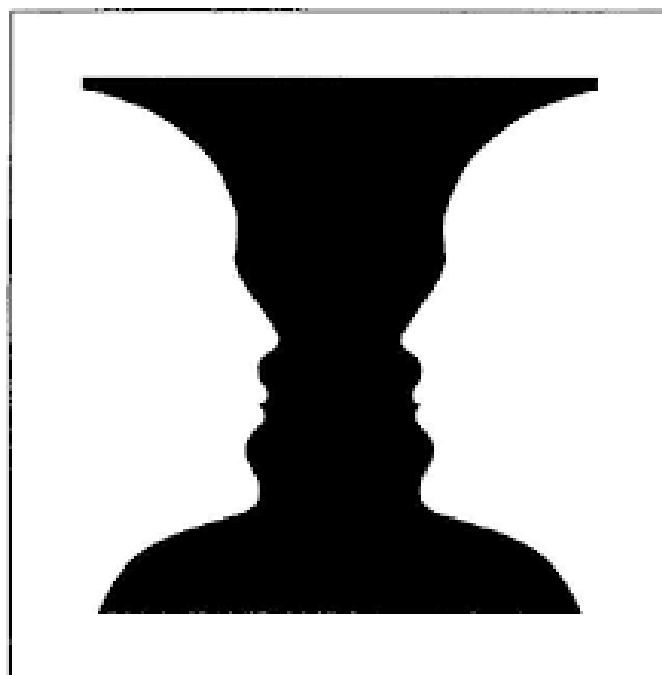


Figure – 5. Rubins Vase

Perception is used as the main influence of an optical illusion. Magicians use tools that deceive the mind in to thinking that one thing is happening when, in reality, it is not. As with Rubin's Vase a drawing can be distorted by the brain when certain shapes are put together in a particular way. This is true in figure 4.

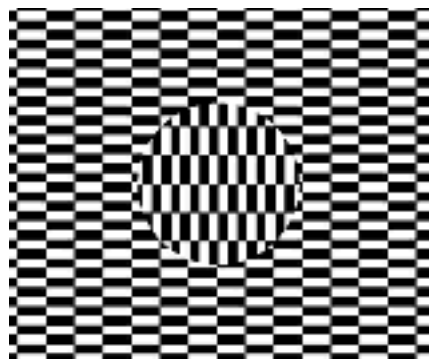


Figure – 6. Is the ball moving?

The image above shows a circular section within a square. The circle has been rotated 90 degrees altering its internal pattern to show a portrait stance of the design within the remainder of the square. The brain believes that the image is moving, therefore, the contents of the circle appear to move. This happens because the communication between the eyes and the brain become muddled, and the message delivered is incorrect by advising the brain that the image is moving when it isn't. In terms of ability, the eyes have limited intelligence in comparison to the brain, so, when the message is relayed to the brain it, in turn, fills the gaps to interpret the message. Sometimes the conclusion is incorrect.

George Berkeley stated that we only observe objects through our senses, our perception of what we expect them to be, they do not exist physically (Lotto, B. 2009). Neuroscientist, Dr. Beau Lotto, discusses that perception is made by what

you anticipate seeing and not what is actually there. By interacting with what it encounters the brain evolves to discover patterns, giving them meaning to create a new normal. It uses its past memory to redefine and make use of what it is actually looking at. This is true of the gold / white, blue / black dress. The colour was interpreted from the historical interactions of the observer's brain such as the light source differences between day and night. Any change in how the light reacts with the eyes will change the perception of what the brain sees which, in turn, redefines its reality.

All three of these words are connected by the fact that they all, in some way, show that things are not always what they seem. They question reality, in very different ways. In the case of form, Plato engaged with the idea that everything in the physical world was worthless, and it was a waste of time contemplating the authenticity and the meaning behind the tangible form as it was never to be perfect. Seeing and experiencing the effects of synaesthesia, although possibly inspirational or overwhelming, are induced by medical anomalies. Perception is also a unique view of the world too. Influences of culture, surroundings and previous experiences are used by the brain to assume meaning to what is seen.

In the case of synaesthesia; it is impossible to control these experiences as they are neurological. This leads me on to my question of ;

How does synaesthesia impact on an artist's way of seeing the world?

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Figures

Figure 1 - *Plato* (unknown date) Available at:

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Figure – 2. *Synesthesia for numbers and shapes* (2022) Available at:

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Figure – 4. *Remember?* (2017) Available at:

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Figure – 5. *Rubins Vase* (2015) Available at:

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Figure – 6. *Is The Ball Moving?* (Date Unknown) Available at:

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