

Title: Presence and Purpose: Rethinking Meaning in Contemporary Art Practice

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List of Figures

Fig. 1: *This Progress* (2010)

Fig 2: *The Artist is Present* (2010)

Fig 3: *One Year Performance* (1978 – 1979)

Fig 4: *Untitled (Free)* (1992)

Fig 5: *How Not to Be Seen* (2013)

Fig 6: *Instructions for Paintings* (1961 – 1962)

Fig 7: *Wall Drawings* (1976)

Introduction

Contemporary art has always been preoccupied with questions of meaning, but it feels as if in recent decades, possibly due to the rise of social media and artificial intelligence, or just the internet in general, this concern has taken on a new urgency.

The conditions that once seemed to guarantee meaningful encounters, physical presence, attentive spectatorship, the stable categories of object and author, have become increasingly unstable. We live, after all, within an environment of fractured attention. In many ways, the contemporary moment forces artists and audiences to negotiate meaning in unpredictable, and sometimes uncomfortable, new ways. In this essay, I want to ask questions like: how do artists create meaning when the ground that once supported meaning has shifted? And what does it mean to be present. physically, emotionally, or even cognitively. in a time when presence itself feels under threat.

I will be looking at works by Marina Abramovic, Yoko Ono, Sol Lewitt, Tino Sehgal, Tehching Hsieh, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Hito Steyerl, as I believe these artists will collectively reveal how contemporary art negotiates presence, attention, participation, and instruction.

Chapter 1



Fig. 1: *This Progress* (2010)

I want to begin with an artwork that, for me, encapsulates the strange tension between presence and meaning in contemporary practice: Tino Sehgal's *This Progress* (2010). This piece unfolds as a sequence of encounters. In the work, the viewer is greeted by a child, the child asks what "progress" means. You walk together and then pass to a teenager, then to an adult, then to an older performer, each offering a different relational dynamic, each re-shaping the question. Its also interesting to note that the work doesn't leave any documentation behind, it exists only in the live exchange, no trace except what the viewer then carries outside of the museum. Meaning emerges through movement, dialogue, and the simple fact of

being there. And yet the work is also so rigorously structure, a choreography of instruction, rules, and transitions that shape every encounter.

What I find particularly mentionable about this work is that it performs two things at once. It demands attention, being present with the person standing in front of you – and it exposes how fragile that attention has become. This duality places Sehgal at a perfect intersection of the concerns raised by Claire Bishop, Catherine Wood and the conceptual legacy explored in *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art* (2012).

Claire Bishop's *Disordered Attention* (2024) argues that contemporary spectatorship is defined by distracted, fragmentation, and cognitive overload. She suggests that artworks today often anticipate a viewer whose focus is already compromised. *This Progress* does something unusual in this context: it tries to reclaim attention, not by overwhelming the viewer with spectacle, but by reducing the aesthetic experience to a face to face conversation. In a world where artwork is often experienced purely for aesthetic purposes, for a post on social media, or a way to seem cultured, Sehgal's work almost acts as a diagnostic tool, revealing the difficulty of simply being present.

At the same time, the artwork's reliance on rules resonates strongly with Sherri Irvins *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art* (2022) which traces how instructions, protocols, and non material structures became central to contemporary practice. Sehgal's work is immaterial not because it rejects form, but because it is built around activation. The performers follow carefully scripted instructions not written down

but transmitted orally to guide the viewer along the route and shape the conversation. Here, the rule becomes the artwork. Presence is not merely encouraged, it is organised, staged, and choreographed through an invisible system. The viewer participates in meaning making, but within predetermined parameters. This tension between freedom and structure becomes a key question in this chapter: how do artists create conditions for meaningful presence while still relying on rules that shape and sometimes limit that presence.



Fig 2: *The Artist is Present* (2010)

To extend this question of how meaning is produced through presence, it is useful to turn briefly to another artwork that tests the limits of attention and relational experience: Marina Abramovic's *The Artist Is Present* (2010). If Sehgal constructs presence through a choreographed sequence of guided encounters, Abramovic

explores presence through endurance, stillness, and the sustained gaze. For nearly three months, she sat silently at a table in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art, inviting viewers to come and sit opposite her and meet her gaze for as long as they chose. Like *The Progress*, the work depends entirely on the viewers participation, but here the encounter is stripped of movement, dialogue, or narrative. Instead, meaning accumulates in the simple act of being looked at and of looking back.

Jonathan Crary's analysis of contemporary attention is especially relevant here, as he argues that "attention today is the most critical and contested resource, continually fragmented and commodified by the forces of late capitalism" (Crary, 2013, p. 3).

Claire Bishop's *Disordered Attention* (2024) is particularly pertinent because Abramovic's work acts almost as a counter image to the conditions Bishop describes. Bishop argues that contemporary culture is increasingly defined by overstimulation and divided attention, artworks, she suggests, must now contend with viewers whose cognitive habits have been shaped by the speed and fragmentation of digital life. Within this context, the extremity of Abramovic's stillness functions as a disciplinary demand. The viewer is asked not just to pay attention, but to sit within attention, to inhabit it. If Sehgal's work gently guides the viewer forward, Abramovic's holds them in place. Presence becomes a kind of test how long can you stay? What does attention become when it is held, not for seconds, but for minutes or even hours?

Catherine Wood's *Performance in Contemporary Art* (2018) highlights how contemporary performance often merges liveness with rehearsal. Abramovic's stillness may feel immediate, but it is carefully produced and maintained. And, as Bishop argues in *artificial Hells* (2012), participation is never politically neutral, the viewer engages, but within a structure they do not control.

Together, Abramovic and Sehgal show how contemporary art constructs presence as something organised, negotiated, and deeply rational.

Chapter 2



Fig 3: *One Year Performance* (1978 – 1979)

In chapter one I explored how presence can be produced through guided encounters and endurance, this chapter examines how meaning in contemporary art emerges through extended duration, relationality, and mediated systems.

Tehching Hsieh's *Year Long Performance* (1978 – 1979), in which he punched a clock every hour for a year, is a radical exploration of bodily endurance, temporal attention, and procedural rigor. The work really exemplifies the argument in *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art* (2012), which emphasises how rule, bound systems can themselves generate aesthetic experience. Hsieh's commitment transforms the passage of time into material; the "art" exists in the lived experience of presence extended over months. As Claire Bishop observes in *Disordered Attention* (2024), a contemporary spectatorship is often fleeting and distracted, but

Hsieh's work foregrounds duration as a counterpoint to this fragmentation. While audiences could not experience the performance in its entirety, the documentation of clocks, timestamps, and photographs communicates the strain of sustained attention, creating a mediated presence that mirrors the endurance required of both performer and viewer.



Fig 4: *Untitled (Free)* (1992)

Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free)* (1992) shifts the focus from endurance to relationality. By cooking and serving Thai Curry in a gallery, Tiravanija dissolves the boundary between artwork and audience, creating a space where social interaction constitutes the medium. Bishop's *Artificial Hells* (2012) frames this kind of participatory work within a critical lens: participation does not automatically

produce democratic meaning. In Tiravanija's installation, participants choose to engage in social exchange, but the conditions the gallery, the cooking setup, the artist's presence shape the encounter. Presence here is negotiated collectively, and meaning arises in the shared rhythms of attention, dialogue, and bodily interaction. Tiravanija's work thus extends the questions raised in chapter 1, if presence is constructed, how do relational and social systems modulate its effects, and how does meaning emerge when it depends collective action rather than individual experience.



Fig 5: *How Not to Be Seen* (2013)

Hito Steyerl's *How Not to Be Seen* (2013) examines mediated presence in a world dominated by digital attention and image circulation. Using video, animation and didactic narration, Steyerl critiques the ways individuals can be rendered invisible, or hyper-visible, through technological systems. Here, a useful lens, contemporary

spectatorship is fragmented and distracted, and Steyerl's work reflects this epistemic condition. Viewers are invited to track visual patterns, decode instructions, and confront the absurdity of digital invisibility. As in Irvin's *Immaterial* (2012), the rules governing the artwork, the coding of the images, the didactic tone, and the performance logic, structure the conditions under which presence and comprehension are possible. Steyerl demonstrates that, in the digital age, meaning is inseparable from the frameworks, technical, social, and cognitive, that govern perception.

Taken together, these three works illustrate the spectrum of strategies contemporary artists use to negotiate presence and meaning. As Rancière argues, "the meaning of an artwork lies not in its form alone, but in the conditions of perception that structure the viewer's experience" (Rancière, 2009, p. 13). Hsieh makes the viewer aware of temporal presence and bodily endurance; Tiravanija foregrounds relational presence and social negotiation; Steyerl interrogates mediated presence within technological systems. All three highlight the central question of this essay how is meaning produced when presence cannot be assumed, and attention is always fragile? They also complicate the notion of purpose in contemporary art. The purpose of these works is not encoded in an object or image; it resides in conditions that must be experienced or interpreted. Bishop's framework in *Artificial Hells* (2012) clarifies that participation and engagement are structured: agency exists, but within the parameters the artist defines. As Bishop notes, "the viewer's presence is not a guarantee of meaning; participation must be organised, framed, and activated"

(Bishop, 2012, p. 37). Wood's observations in *Performance in Contemporary Art* (2018) further remind us that liveness and mediation coexist; even the most "raw" or social encounters are shaped by rehearsal, instruction, and environment.

Ultimately these works suggest that meaning in contemporary art is less a product and more a process. Presence is a medium, purpose is emergent, and attention, whether disciplined, relational, or mediated, becomes the site where significance occurs, by situating Hsieh, Tiravanija and Steyerl in dialogue with the theoretical frameworks of Bishop, Wood and Irvin, it becomes clear that contemporary art no longer assumes a passive audience. Instead, it structures conditions under which attention, action and perception intersect, producing spaces where meaning can emerge even during distraction, social questions posed in the introduction: meaning is not inherent in the work itself, but in the relational, temporal, and procedural architectures that scaffold presence and guide spectatorship.

Chapter 3

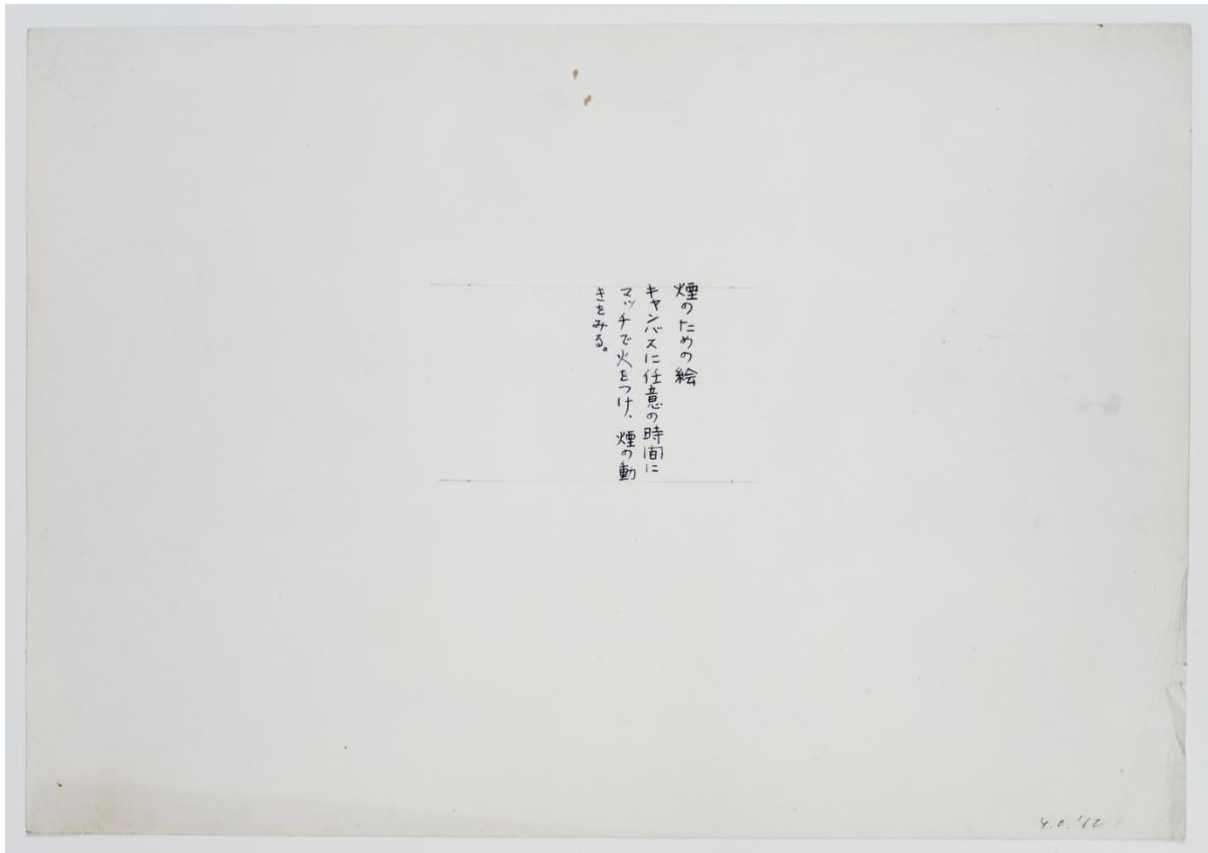


Fig 6: *Instructions for Paintings* (1961 – 1962)

In the previous chapters, we explored how presence is produced through endurance, relational encounters, and mediated attention. In this chapter, I want to focus on how instructions and conceptual frameworks shape contemporary art, and how meaning can emerge in works that are less about physical objects or spectacle and more about ideas, processes, and audience engagement.

Yoko Ono's *Instruction Paintings* consist of textual prompts, often simple, poetic, or absurd that invite viewers to imagine, enact, or mentally participate in the artwork. One of the earliest examples, *Painting to Be Stepped On* (1960), instructs participants to literally step on a canvas. The physical artwork is transformed by the

act of engagement, but Ono's text, the instructions themselves, is the true medium. Here, the concept of presence shifts: it is not the artist or the object that anchors meaning, but the viewer's action and imagination. As Claire Bishop points out in *Artificial Hells* (2012), participation does not automatically confer democratic meaning. In Ono's work, the audience is active, but the parameters are set by the artist. The viewer's imagination, movement, and attention are guided, sometimes playfully, sometimes subversively, but always within a framework that shapes how the work is experienced. The instructions become both architecture and medium: they structure the conditions under which presence and understanding can occur.

Sherri Irvin's *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art* (2012) is especially useful here because it highlights how rules, instructions, and systems can generate meaning even when there is little or no material object to encounter. Irvin argues that these "invisible architectures" produce aesthetic and conceptual effects through participation, duration, or procedural constraints. Ono's instruction-based work is a perfect example: the rules of the artwork are clear, minimal, but generative. They create a space for thought and action without prescribing a single outcome. As in *Disordered Attention* (2024), where Bishop describes contemporary spectators as fragmented and distracted, Ono's text-based pieces ask the viewer to focus attention differently to inhabit imagination as a site of presence, even if only briefly, and to make meaning in a space between thinking, seeing, and doing.

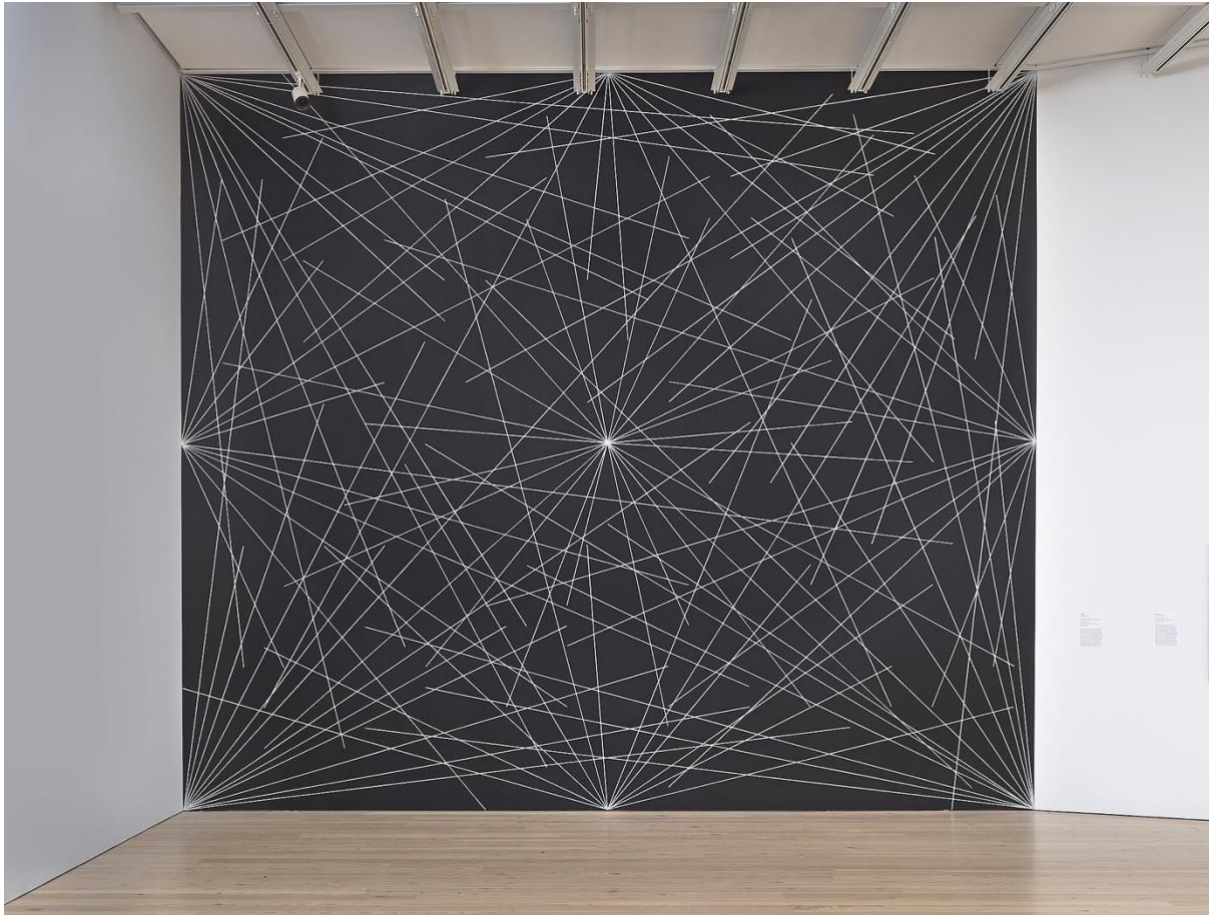


Fig 7: *Wall Drawings* (1976)

Sol Lewitt's *Wall Drawings* operate on a similar principle of immateriality, but through highly systematised procedures and delegation. Lewitt would create a set of instructions for a drawing, lines, shapes, or geometric arrangements, then hand them to assistants who executed the work in gallery spaces. Here, the artist's body is removed from the production, and the material artwork is secondary to the conceptual framework. In *Immaterial*, Irvin (2012) emphasises that rule-based art transforms the relationship between artist, viewer, and object. Lewitt's work literally makes the instructions central, the viewer is confronted with the visible outcome of a conceptual system, yet the meaning resides in the logical and procedural framework, not in the aesthetic surface alone. The audience witnesses both the artwork and the

conceptual scaffolding that underpins it, creating a dual awareness of material presence and immaterial structure.

Both Ono and Lewitt highlight a tension central to contemporary art, the artwork depends on the viewer or executor to exist fully, but the framework constrains that participation. Bishop's *Artificial Hells* (2012) reminds us that this is not a flaw but a defining feature of participatory meaning. Even when audiences engage, the parameters set by the artist guide perception, action, and interpretation. Similarly, Wood's *Performance in Contemporary Art* (2018) helps us see that "liveness" is always mediated, whether through physical endurance, relational presence, or instruction-based systems, presence in contemporary art is produced, not given. For Ono, it is mental and imaginative; for Lewitt, it is procedural and cognitive, in both cases, the spectator becomes a co-producer of meaning, yet within a clearly defined system.

These two works also speak to the idea of attention and temporality. Ono's instructions often unfold in imagination over time, while Lewitt's systems can be executed over hours or days, or re-created repeatedly in different contexts. Bishop's *Disordered Attention* (2024) is particularly relevant here contemporary audiences are accustomed to fragmented focus, yet these works demand engagement on multiple levels thought, action, and observation, without overwhelming the participant. Meaning emerges in this interplay of attentional effort, imaginative investment, and procedural clarity.

Ultimately, Ono and Lewitt demonstrate that contemporary art can construct meaning without relying on conventional objects or visual spectacle. Instead, presence is generated through interaction with rules, instructions, and conceptual frameworks. Irvin's notion of immaterial architectures, Bishop's analysis of participation and attention, and Wood's insights on performance collectively illuminate how these works operate. In doing so, they answer the ongoing questions of this dissertation, presence is something enacted, purpose is embedded in relational and procedural conditions, and meaning emerges through the interplay of artist, participant, and system. By foregrounding instructions and frameworks, Ono and Lewitt extend the project's investigation into how contemporary art makes presence, purpose, and attention not just visible, but experientially felt.

Conclusion

Across the artworks and theories discussed in this dissertation, one central insight emerges: in contemporary art, meaning is rarely inherent in an object or performance. Instead, it is produced through structures of attention, relationality, duration, and instruction. From Tino Sehgal's choreographed encounters in *This Progress*, Marina Abramovic's still gaze in *The Artist Is Present*, Hsieh's endurance pieces, Tiravanija's social interactions, Steyerl's mediated video systems, to Ono and LeWitt's instruction-based works, the common thread is that presence must be enacted, attention engaged, and participation guided. Meaning is never given; it is always emergent, situated, and relational.

This project argues that presence in contemporary art is constructed rather than spontaneous. Sehgal and Abramovic show that even seemingly immediate encounters are carefully orchestrated through choreography, endurance, or procedural rehearsal (Wood, 2018). Hsieh, Tiravanija, and Steyerl extend this idea by demonstrating how duration, social negotiation, and technological mediation shape how viewers experience art (Bishop, 2012; 2024). Ono and LeWitt reveal that rules and instructions function as frameworks for attention and imagination, producing presence even without a traditional object (Irvin, 2012). Across these examples, the artist's purpose is embedded in these architectures: not to control meaning fully, but to create conditions for meaning to arise.

Participation emerges as a critical component of contemporary meaning-making. As Bishop argues, participation is not automatically liberating or democratic; it is shaped by parameters set by the artist, which guide engagement, attention, and experience. Whether stepping on Ono's canvas, preparing food in Tiravanija's gallery, or following Lewitt's instructions, the audience is active but always in dialogue with an underlying framework. This duality, between freedom and structure, action and rule—highlights a defining tension: presence and purpose are co-produced, contingent on interaction between artist, system, and viewer.

Attention is central to this exploration. In a world marked by distraction and fragmented focus, contemporary artworks deliberately modulate attention, through stillness, endurance, relational exchange, or procedural engagement, to create

moments of presence. Bishop's *Disordered Attention* (2024) illuminates how artists negotiate the conditions of contemporary spectatorship, where sustained engagement is neither guaranteed nor simple.

Ultimately, meaning in contemporary art cannot be understood solely through objects or images. Meaning arises from orchestrated presence, structured participation, and deployed attentional, temporal, and procedural frameworks.

Contemporary art does not present itself as a finished, self-contained product, it asks viewers to inhabit conditions, follow rules, engage relationally, and focus attentively. Presence, purpose, and meaning emerge from these systems.

In short: contemporary art doesn't create meaning just by showing something new or beautiful. It's about shaping how we engage and experience. Whether pushing physical limits, inviting social interaction, using technology, or handing us instructions, these artworks show that presence is performed and demands attention. Meaning isn't fixed; it's co-created in the moment through interaction. Presence and purpose are always moving, shaped by frameworks artists build around us.

Contemporary art is less about objects quietly sitting in a gallery, and more about dynamic architectures of attention, action, and imagination, making us active participants in meaning-making.

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