

Student Name: Oisín McDaid

Student Number: 2100035

ADAD5003 Research in Context

Essay Question 4:

Taking the ideas discussed by Nicolas Bourriaud, that an artist's role should be a 'translator between worlds', explore this concept in relation to the role of the artist/collaborator in 21st Century with reference to two practitioners or thinkers

Tutor: Gwenllian Beynon

Word Count: • 2298 (Excluding Headings, Question and References/Bibliography)

Taking the ideas discussed by Nicolas Bourriaud, that an artist's role should be a 'translator between worlds', explore this concept in relation to the role of the artist/collaborator in 21st Century with reference to two practitioners or thinkers

Nicolas Bourriaud stated that he believes that artists are translators and I agree with this statement entirely. Whether a work is in response to an event or idea, or just made off a whim, the artist is conveying their intentions, opinions and even aspirations through a work. An artist's art is an insight into their mind, it translates concepts in a way language cannot. It not only allows for translation it also encourages interpretation. The ability to visually interpret another persons thoughts, allows art to transcend language and if you view another individual's mind as another 'world', it translates between them.

Through the essay, I intend to explore Borriaud's statement in more depth and examine how intention and era are conveyed throughout art and visual expression. I aim to delve into and compare the similarities between art and language in order to better understand how these similarities are used to convey meaning through work. Through evaluating the major events of the 21st Century, I will analyse how they have impacted and shaped the art work that will represent this era of history.

Art in essence is a language. When a piece is made, it is communicating a message. Borriaud, with his statement, is portraying the thought process that through art a viewer can not only process the artist's intent but also form their own thoughts from this. This line of thinking is common place with most peoples' view of art. Art is incredibly personal and creating work is an intimate expression. By sharing work you are 'translating' that message to whoever spectates it.

Through the ability to communicate through art, expression of worlds and lifestyles that seem incomparable to some, are presented through both expected and unsuspecting means. Works can be incredibly heavy handed; presenting exactly what the artist aims to communicate. Work of this like, tends to be more of the activist variety; aiming to present issues that are important to address. These pieces are integral to art being used as a mediator between worlds. Other works, I find, lend themselves more to interpretation. These works have all the same intent but more freedom to be dissected by the eyes and ears of the viewer. Pieces like these, I feel, pose more of a question to the viewer and in a sense make the spectators a participant of the work. Allowing the 'translation' to become more of a 'conversation'.

Nicolas Borriaud was born in 1965 and is a French curator and critic. Borriaud has had a large impact on how we view and relate art to social context. '*Relational Aesthetics*' is a term coined by Borriaud which he defines as the, "tendency to make art based on, or inspired by, human relations and their social context", which he writes about in his book *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), (Tate, 2017). The line of thinking Borriaud has encouraged, is focused on the maker being a translator of information to the viewer. Art is clearly a means of establishing an open communication between the art and the viewer. Nicolas Borriaud coining this term and being vocal about how art is a 'translator' and it is an artist's job to communicate information to the viewer, has shaped how we, as creatives and art enjoyers, consume this media.

If art is language, then there are key features of art that dictate interpretation. I believe these are the colour used, the subject matter and theme, the composition, and the material used. These features of art have similarities to linguistics; where tone, grammar, syntax, and phonetics may be substituted out for the key aspects of art.

The relevance of linguistics and semiotics is key to understanding Barriault's statement. Semiotics is defined as, "the study (or 'science') of signs and signification that has developed from the pioneering work of Saussure" (Barker, 2004, p.181). Through semiotics and the concept of indexical ideas and imagery, artists are better able to communicate their ideas. Through the use of symbolism and signifiers the viewers are better able to digest and understand the artists' intentions. Due to how we as a culture have associated meanings to colour and imagery we are better able to communicate through visual media; not to mention when tackling art that references cultural events or issues the signifiers surrounding that subject matter. It is this type of association that allows the translation of message and themes that makes activism art so impactful and so common place nowadays.

Art and activism are intrinsically linked due to the application of visual media and the human brain's ability to recognise signifiers and respond appropriately. Through the use of art's ability to share a story and translate a message to all, it makes it an invaluable tool for addressing and tackling social and cultural issues. Not only through art can you use the association of signifiers but you can also pour emotion into the work. This allows the artist to not only communicate the chosen matter but also to portray their views and emotions towards it. This ability to communicate emotions and present and add to a movement while conveying your own 'thoughts', is why the 21st century already has a vast catalogue of impactful activism work. In this current century despite being more

connected then ever through the internet and social media, it can still feel like we all live 'worlds' apart; through art we are able to connect those worlds. We can share our experiences and feelings and visually appeal to others. We create a 'dialogue' that resonates with our humanity, our sympathy, and in a lot of cases our empathy. It is through our ability to be empathetic that activism art has been able to flourish as well as it has this century.

A common phrase you hear when walking around gallery spaces and in reference to viewing art is, 'What does it say to you?'. A vast amount of the gallery experience is in reference to art speaking to a viewer. Or when a piece of art resonates with an individual's experience or causes an adverse reaction, we refer to it as a 'conversation', we are communicating with the work and its subsequent themes. If we refer to our experience using words that are synonymous with language and translation, then Bourriaud's statement that artists are translators must be true. If artists translate intentions and viewers respond to them, then artists must be translators.

Art throughout different periods has conveyed different eras and the norms of that time. Through art we have an insight into the societal, cultural, historical and religious views of the past. From the origins of prehistoric wall murals through religious works of the renaissance to the phase of the cubist movement, art has continuously evolved its means of translating messages. Comparing historical works to the Postmodernist works of the 21st century, you can see a clear difference between how artists have chosen the subject matter they use.

The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies defines Postmodernism as, “a response to substantive changes in the organization and enactment of our social worlds” (Barker, 2004, p.156). We are currently living in the 21st Century which is arguably one of, if not, the most postmodern we have experienced as creatives and as a society. This current century has seen a vast amount of social change and movement and a vast amount of work made in response. More now than ever we have art that is truly translating the stories of the era. The 21st century, arguably more so than any other, has seen a vast amount of social and cultural campaigns that have addressed and changed the way we think and act. A quote I recently saw from a *Howstuffworks* article by John Donovan summarises this remarkably well, “Earth-shaking, mind-bending, being-altering changes have upended the way we live and work. We eat differently. We play differently. We communicate differently. We, in many, many ways, simply are different from how we were in the last days of the late 20th century” (Donovan, 2019).

If we step back and evaluate all the monumental events that have taken place in just over a of couple decades within this century it is easy to see how our cultures, and the art made in response have evolved. Throughout just the early beginning of this century we have seen world wide pandemic, social protests and movements, and war and terror; alongside remarkable advancements in both technology and cultural acceptance. This century has provided a countless amount of inspiration and subject matter for both old and new artists. In this current climate a vast amount of work is being made everyday due to how much content and context there is to draw from. Making this century by far one of the most creative to date.

Comparing our current 21st century works to those of the works of the past, they are far more expressive and personal. There is a larger focus on message. The importance of meaning is an integral part of work to the point that through art education students are encouraged to create work from meaning and attribute it to the meaningless. Through the inclusion of meaning that we associate to work art has transitioned into a tool or vehicle of meaning.

In the 21st century we see a vast amount of works that include the spectators. A growing amount of sound and installation works have become common place in galleries and shows; another way in which viewers become more included in the conversation. *Obliteration Room* (2002-2022) by Yayoi Kusama is an incredible example of the type of conversation that can be created when an artist is able to have an open conversation with the viewers. The installation is a completely white space comprised of white walls, white furniture and cupboards that are common place among homes. This choice of 'setting' is part of the inspiration in which she experienced a hallucination as a child after staring at the patterned table cloth. After staring at this motif, Kusama proceeded to see the pattern over the walls, ceiling and furniture. However, through art she has been able to include additional people into this experience. The viewers are given a pack of coloured dots upon entry and using these dots they are allowed to freely express themselves in anyway they want by sticking the dots onto the plain white surfaces. This work has allowed the artist and the spectators to set up an 'open dialogue', with both sides expressing and translating their thoughts and ideas through the use of the sticker pack handouts.



Two photos of Kusama's *Obliteration Room* (2002-2022) with Figure.1 (Left) showing an early stage of one of the rooms and Figure.2 (Right) showing the outcome of a room at the end of the installation.

Amy Sherald is an American painter whose main subject, as written in the *About the Artist* section of Artvee, is "depicting African Americans in everyday settings" (Artvee, 2020). One piece in particular truly embodies the spirit of the 21st Century's ability to grow from the past perfectly. This piece is called *For Love, and for country* (2022). This piece recreates and, in a sense 'parodies', an iconic photo from the 20th century taken at the end of the Second World War. It is a recreation of *Alfred Eisenstadt's photograph of a sailor and a nurse kissing in Times Square* (1945), and it can be argued that is a modernised version of said image. Sherald's work has a recurring motif of painting 'Black life' with inspiration from different points of American History. Her art focuses a lot on the representation of 'Black life' is due to her belief that, "representation that has been largely excluded from art history" (Palumbo, 2022). Sherald replaces the figures in the original photo with two black men for her painting. Using the association and the the history surrounding the previous image Sherald attaches the additional context to challenge the thoughts of the viewers. The two black males kissing against the blue background was painted by the artist as she believes that LGBTQ+ rights are currently in danger in current day America and through using an image of the previous generation she is communicating a message of tolerance of acceptance in our new century. I believe this piece not only shows a great example of 21st century art activism but also how our culture has progressed between the direct visual comparison of the 20th century image.



Figure.3 For Love, and for country (2022) by Amy Sherald

The idea of art is to express, and to express is to translate emotion. Artists translate these emotions through work and then we become listeners, watchers, spectators to these spectacles; and in some cases even participants.

Art is one of the most beautiful ways to express pain, loss, love, joy and an incredible way to allow others to join you through it. It an unbelievable way of moving an individual. Through sound, through imagery, through sense, art finds a way. As the artist it almost becomes second nature to convey a message. The message may not always be clear but sometimes the message is as simple as the way you feel as you create.

The idea that art has to translate a grander meaning or purpose is the reason hierarchy still exists in the art world. Some works are meant to be. Some works are meant to translate social injustice to those who live worlds away from it. And others meant to simply be a self expression. It's beautifully simple to step back and look at what art is capable of doing, what it is capable of saying.

Art is truly its own language and is only limited by the imagination of its 'speakers' and of those who 'listen'.

Bibliography:

Books:

Barker, C. (2004) *The SAGE Dictionary of Culture Studies*. London: SAGE Publications

Articles:

Adesina, P. (n.d.). 'The most important painting of the 21st Century'. [online] www.bbc.com. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20221209-the-most-important-painting-of-the-21st-century> (Accessed on 11th December 2022)

Artvee. (n.d.). *For love, and for country by Amy Sherald*. [online] Available at: <https://artvee.com/dl/for-love-and-for-country/> (Accessed 11th December 2022)

Bourriaud, N. (2019). *Nicolas Bourriaud on the Artist as a Translator Between Worlds*. [online] Frieze. Available at: <https://www.frieze.com/article/nicolas-bourriaud-artist-translator-between-worlds> (Accessed on 6th December 2022)

curatorsintl.org. (n.d.). *Nicolas Bourriaud - About - Independent Curators International*. [online] Available at: <https://curatorsintl.org/about/collaborators/7663-nicolas-bourriaud> (Accessed on 6th December 2022)

Holland, B. (2015). *Operationalizing the Information Age, Knowledge Economy, 21st Century (Opinion)*. [online] Education Week. Available at: <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-operationalizing-the-information-age-knowledge-economy-21st-century/2015/10>. (Accessed on 10th December 2022)

HowStuffWorks. (2019). *20 Memorable Moments of the 21st Century So Far*. [online] Available at: <https://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/20-memorable-moments-21stcentury.htm>. (Accessed on the 11th December 2022)

Tate (2012). *Yayoi Kusama's Obliteration Room – TateShots | Tate*. [online] Tate. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/yayoi-kusama-8094/yayoi-kusamas-obliteration-room>. (Accessed on 10th December 2022)

Tate (2017). *Relational aesthetics – Art Term | Tate*. [online] Tate. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/r/relational-aesthetics>. (Accessed on 6th December 2022)

University of Vermont (2019). *Definitions of Semiotic Terms*. [online] Uvm.edu. Available at: https://www.uvm.edu/~tstreete/semiotics_and_ads/terminology.html. (Accessed on 10th December 2022)

vbcpgadmin (2020). *Who Were the People in the Times Square Kiss on V-J Day?* [online] Veterans Breakfast Club. Available at: <https://veteransbreakfastclub.org/who-were-the-people-in-the-times-square-kiss-on-v-j-day/>. (Accessed on 11th December 2022)

White, K. (2022). Yayoi Kusama's Playful 'Obliteration Room' Has Been a Hit for 20 Years. Here Are Three Surprising Facts You Might Not Know About It. [online] Artnet News. Available at: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/three-things-yayoi-kusama-obliteration-room-2159903>. (Accessed on 10th December 2022)

Images:

Figure.1

Available at: [https://www.google.co.uk/url?](https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.aucklandartgallery.com%2Fwhats-on%2Fexhibition%2Fyayoi-kusama-the-obliteration-room%3Fq%3D%252Fwhats-on%252Fexhibition%252Fyayoi-kusama-the-obliteration-room&psig=AOvVaw1LvJ4zbwEDrKw50LaBin6T&ust=1671109396550000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CBAQjhxqFwoTCIC7zOGV-fsCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAo)

[sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.aucklandartgallery.com%2Fwhats-on%2Fexhibition%2Fyayoi-kusama-the-obliteration-room%3Fq%3D%252Fwhats-on%252Fexhibition%252Fyayoi-kusama-the-obliteration-room&psig=AOvVaw1LvJ4zbwEDrKw50LaBin6T&ust=1671109396550000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CBAQjhxqFwoTCIC7zOGV-fsCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAo](https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.aucklandartgallery.com%2Fwhats-on%2Fexhibition%2Fyayoi-kusama-the-obliteration-room%3Fq%3D%252Fwhats-on%252Fexhibition%252Fyayoi-kusama-the-obliteration-room&psig=AOvVaw1LvJ4zbwEDrKw50LaBin6T&ust=1671109396550000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CBAQjhxqFwoTCIC7zOGV-fsCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAo)

Figure.2

Available at: <https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fnews.artnet.com%2Fart-world%2Fthree-things-yayoi-kusama-obliteration-room-2159903&psig=AOvVaw1LvJ4zbwEDrKw50LaBin6T&ust=1671109396550000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CBAQjhxqFwoTCIC7zOGV-fsCFQAAAAAdAAAAABA2>

Figure.3

Available at: <https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.vip-hauserwirth.com%2Fworks%2Fshera114177%2F&psig=AOvVaw38p1OP9p-2kX6Bd9ZMbb9Z&ust=1671112161333000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CBAQjhxqFwoTCMiv9oeg-fsCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAE>