

Research in Practice

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Introduction

This essay will explore the three keywords Emotion, space and perception. My concept is to explore each word to determine if they connect and form a link in any way to my chosen area of interest which is health and well-being, and whether this is affected and expressed in any way by different forms of art. I will look at three very different artists Tracey Emin (Emotion), Vincent Van Gogh (space) and Hans Holbein (perception). I will also look at the theorists and philosophers George Gault (Emotion), John Dewey (Emotion), Henri Lefebvre (Space) and John Berger (perception). This will lead me to a conclusion and sub-questions that will form a topic that I hope to explore in much more depth next year for my dissertation.

Emotion

“A strong feeling deriving from one’s circumstances, mood, or relationships with others”. (Oxford dictionaries online)



Figure 1: Tracey Emin (1998) *My Bed*

“Emotions can be real rather than merely imagined” (Gault,2007). It could be argued that Gault is meaning that emotions do physically exist and occur as opposed to being fabricated or simply ‘made up’. This is perceived in Emin’s *My Bed* (Figure 1) where Emin has displayed her actual bed and its surroundings, this is how she lived when she was going through a state of depression following a relationship break up. This exhibit was not conjured up from her imagination but was a true representation of her life at the time. This can be seen as an expressive form of art which stems from deep personal emotions. Emin herself stated that “the essence of creativity, that

moment of conception...the whole being of everything...it had to be about where it was really coming from.” The message Emin is trying to get across here is that she had to display her bed in all its entirety for the audience to see where her concept stemmed from, the whole being of everything can mean that for those few days the bed was her everything, where she ate, slept, and relived her bodily functions. The bed and its surrounding area were in a complete state of mess. When Emin finally realised her situation, she simply stepped back to view what she had created, stained crumpled bedding, soiled sheets, empty alcohol bottles, stained clothes and condoms littered the area. This was the artwork she had unassumingly created while going through an array of emotions and her responses to them.

Emotions are reactions to situations, how we respond differs from person to person. Emin’s response was to hide away from the world and ‘live’ in her bed for several days. Someone else may have responded in quite the opposite way perhaps decided to move on with their life with a slightly more positive outlook.

“Emotion in all its entirety is a mode of behavior which is purposive, or has an intellectual content, and which also reflects itself into feeling or affects, as the subjective valuation of that which is objectively expressed in the idea of purpose.” (Dewey,1895)

To deconstruct what Dewey is saying let’s break his words down. Emotion in its entirety could be described as displaying emotion as a whole, in Emin’s case this could mean her whole life at the time. The mode of behavior could be interpreted as the way in which one expresses their behavior, like taking to her bed, purposive meaning that how one chooses to react is purposeful and meant. This could be argued that the behavior is not intentional and done while under a deep emotional state of depression, where the person is not fully aware of the implications of their actions and how they may or may not affect their life decisions. The intellectual content could be referring to the expression or reasoning behind the actions, again feeling lost and in a depressive state. This would surely have a negative affect on the persons feelings and distort their reasoning and direction for their path ahead.

Sociologists of emotions have argued that “understanding emotions is essential to the pursuit of knowledge, and that the relationship between them should be rethought.” (Holland, 2007). This is meaning that to understand the emotion that one is feeling will be extremely important and necessary to explore and ask questions, so that they can plan and determine their goal or treatment to recover from that very emotion, be it a positive or negative emotion.

Emotions can be seen as what drives us through life, they are created in our brain and are generally the response to situations and events. How we deal with them is down to personal preference.

Space

Defined as “A continuous area or expanse which is free, available, or unoccupied” (Oxford dictionaries online)

Artists use the sense of space to make objects look smaller or bigger, so that they can make the viewer think that the subject is up close or far away. They also use space to convey their thoughts or emotions into the artwork.



Figure 2: Vincent Van Gogh *Corridor in the asylum*

“Space is a social product....it is not simply ‘there’, a neutral container waiting to be filled, but is a dynamic, humanly constructed means of control”. (Lefebvre,1991)

The space that Lefebvre is referring to here could be a rolling landscape of roads and fields with the open space being the neutral container which could be filled with many things that come into the viewers imagination. Alternatively in the case of Van Goghs *Corridor in the asylum* (figure 2) it could symbolize a narrow closed in feeling and give the appearance and the feeling that the corridor is never ending. This is appearing to be the case in this piece of art where the never-ending corridor mirrors the never-ending journey with the artists mental health, symbolizing that there is no end in sight. The corridors portray a feeling of not being able to escape or get out to at least inhale a large breath of fresh air, they appear almost suffocating.

Cornwall refers to space as “using the concept of space as a lens through which to view practices of participation.” (Cornwall, 2002) This is portrayed in Van Goghs corridor in the asylum, it is as though he is looking down the corridor through a lens, as if his side vision is blinkered and everything at the furthest end is small giving the sense that it is far away and remains out of reach. This could also be the feeling with his mental health.

Artists typically use space to add depth and illusion to their work. This can give the feeling that objects are smaller or further away than others. Pepperell and Haertel, say that “artists are fascinated by the question of how to accurately depict visual space.” And “When different artworks are compared which depict the same visual

space there are often consistencies.” Pepperell and Haertel (2014) This can be described as there being no right or wrong way of depicting a visual space, as every artist has a different style or technique and different materials, then this would certainly show discrepancies and variations if they all attempted to depict the same scene.

Space appears to benefit one’s general health and wellbeing, being in a closed in or cluttered space can fill your mind up with too many thoughts. Living near or having access to open green spaces can reduce one’s risk of many health conditions which effectively promotes health and well-being.

Light can be used to create the illusion of extra space; this is evidenced in the work of James Turrell. He projected simple images of shapes onto the walls of an empty room through use of stark, bright white lights, this made the room seem bigger than what it was and portrayed the feeling of extra space.

Perception

Defined as “the ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses” or “the way in which something is regarded, understood or interpreted” (Oxford languages dictionaries online)

The opening statement in the book ways of seeing by philosopher John Berger states that “seeing comes before words. The child looks before it can speak.” (Berger, 1972) This can be interpreted that the child recognizes the image through the sense of sight, perception and imagination without having the ability to, or needing to speak the words.



Figure 3: The Ambassadors Hans Holbein (1533)

Berger describes Holbein's painting (Figure 3) as "being created with skill to create the illusion that he is looking at real objects" (Berger, 1972). According to Berger, early oil paintings and works of art were often seen as a way of celebrating wealth. This seems to be the case in Holbein's piece, and I ask the question: is it a direct aim to get the audience to see how wealthy the two Ambassadors are? It is powerful in the way in which the viewer perceives the extent of their wealth, fine clothes and several objects which presume that they are from an educated background. The use of color and fine lines are striking and simply enhance the portrait in all its finery.

"The naïve viewer's style of art appreciation can be understood as an extension of everyday perception" (Bartlett, 1932). Here Bartlett is referring to the naivety of the general viewer's appreciation of art, and it must be questioned whether they fully understand what it is that the artist wants them to perceive.

"When we see a landscape, we situate ourselves in it. As if we 'saw' the art of the past, we would situate ourselves in history. (Berger, 1972:11). Here Berger is saying that when a viewer looks at a landscape or a landscape painting, they automatically perceive themselves within that environment; this comes from one's imagination and can link to a feeling of emotion. It doesn't matter what period of time is portrayed; we still imagine ourselves as part of that time era. Berger goes on to say "When we are prevented from seeing it, we are being deprived of the history which belongs to us. Who benefits from this deprivation?" (Berger, 1932). As viewers, if we are deprived of seeing something, we also don't get the chance to find out about the history of it. No one benefits from this deprivation as both parties lose out; the viewer misses the opportunity to experience the scene and the artist misses the chance to have their work viewed. The question raised here is that artists create for an audience and if no-one views their work then what is the purpose of it in the first place?

"The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe." (Berger, 1972). This can be interpreted as the way in which we perceive images or works of art; they can be influenced by our own beliefs or the knowledge that we hold on to that subject. For instance, the painting *Wheatfields with crows* by Vincent Van Gogh at first glance is just a nice painting of the fields, but on closer analysis and gathering more information you see the painting in a different way, one of sadness as it was one of the last paintings he did before he died and was one of the views from his asylum window. As you re-evaluate the painting you imagine yourself in his place and almost sense the emotions and turmoil that he was going through at the time of completing the painting and also the time leading up to his death.

As discussed under the keyword space, I briefly mentioned James Turrell and his way of creating extra space in an empty room with bright lights. This also links to perception as the bright lighting and stark colour white on the walls give the illusion that the walls do not exist and that the light is coming from much further afield. This is a great example of the way in which we can perceive something that is a lot smaller than what it actually first appears to be.

Conclusion

By defining, exploring, understanding and deconstructing the three chosen keywords, I have come to the conclusion that although seemingly having different meanings, there appears to be quite a strong connection between Emotion, Space and Perception. From my research each of the words appear to have some sort of link to the same philosophers or theorists and each of them mention some or all three of the keywords in their theories. Artists who create works from their own emotions seem to also look at the space around them and how they can fill that space with exhibits, to ensure that the audience are able to perceive their feelings and emotions. Within my research I found that each word had some direct link to the artist and their area of work. Emotion is within the artist, space is around the artist and perception is through the eyes of the artist. The area of research I will be exploring further and linking these keywords to for my dissertation is "The impact of art and creativity on the health and wellbeing of individuals" I want to explore how both creating art and viewing art may have a positive or negative impact on a person's physical or mental health. I will also look at a few sub- questions such as: Do artists portray their own emotions as a way of release? Is art directly linked to health and well-being? What are the health benefits of participating in art sessions? Should art sessions be offered to patients on acute hospital wards to aid recovery? Can art be considered as a therapy for general hospital patients? and can simply viewing artwork help to release emotions and generally aid wellbeing?

My chosen research question currently is:

How does art and creativity directly impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals.

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