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Introduction

In this essay I will be discussing three major keywords that are connected to my practice: Reaction, Concept and Sensory. Each key word relates directly to the experience a viewer has when they see a piece of artwork. A person's perception and understanding of the piece will often be conditioned by the reaction they have whether this be shock or awe, questioning why people/ artists do certain things: an emotional response to art; or maybe a physical impact stimulating a sensory impact on the individual. Art affects each person in different ways whilst also connecting and uniting through the experience.

Reaction

A reaction to art is an emotional response. It plays a central role in the relationship between art and its audience, serving as both an extent of its emotional power and a reflection of its cultural importance. According to Simon O'Sullivan (2001) art can be seen as an '*Affect*' which he identifies as "moments of intensity" (p.126). Art has long been an influence for powerful reactions sometimes positive, sometimes negative. When art prompts a reaction, it is usually an intense feeling. The reaction is the important part, as without it, art has no meaning. Mary Kirsch Boehm requotes French artist

Edgar Degas “Art is not what you see, but what you make others see” (Boehm, 2023). Degas suggests that the importance is not based on form or medium but in the viewer’s response.

A controversial piece of art that received different reactions was Marcus Harvey’s 1995 painting of Myra Hindley titled ‘*Myra*’ (fig 1). The painting is a huge piece measuring 9ft by 11ft and was made using casts of children’s hands to build up the black and white image (fig 2). The subject of the painting was infamous in Britain for murdering five children, four of which were between the ages of 8 and 12, and one was 17. A devastating event at the time, the painting caused massive controversy as it was created using children’s handprints.



Figure 1: 'Myra' by Marcus Harvey (1995) Figure 2: Close up of 'Myra'

As an artist, Harvey often uses subjects in a controversial way, such as creating a spray-painted relief of Margaret Thatcher which is “made up of 3D cast guns, skulls, dildos and vegetables” (Artlyst, 2013).



Figure 3: 'Maggie' by Marcus Harvey (2009)

A more recent Margaret Thatcher piece is his nude sculpture of Thatcher posing with a pig's head (see figure 4). Harvey stated that; “I don't want to produce work that is a pleasant distraction, then you move on to something else. I would like it to stop their day - to make it an encounter” (The Argus, 2016). Harvey's intention therefore is to cause a reaction, which is not always a positive one. However, having a reaction to his work causes conversations to open around it rather than just moving on, which is arguably what Harvey wants from his art. Some of the reactions to the piece were negative, with people commenting that it is 'disgusting', 'disrespectful', 'hideous' and 'scary'. However, some found it 'humorous', 'unapologetic and brash', and 'political yet ambiguous' (comments from the public cited in The Argus, 2016).



Figure 4: 'Maggie Island' by Marcus Harvey (2016)

When the 'Myra' portrait was revealed, the reaction was mainly negative. Most people thought it was disrespectful to the victims and their families. Often when art is shocking it is because it touches on a 'taboo' subject such as Tracey Emin's *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995*, which was sensational for its sexual implication; despite the works shocking title the names listed were people Emin had shared a bed with, some friends and some family.



Figure 5: 'Everyone Have Ever Slept With' by Tracey Emin (1963–1995)

However, 'Myra' was shocking in a disrespectful way. Some people complained that the artist should not "be allowed to make money or fame out of the death of little children" (cited in Blanchard, 1997). As a reaction, the

piece was defaced by the public with ink, eggs and physical violence. The show was also picketed by mothers of the victims who formed a group called *Mothers Against Murder and Aggression*. One of the members of the group asked for the portrait to be taken down which demonstrates how strongly the public reacted to an art piece.

For my own art, I like to create shocking art for a reaction. I feel that people remember the shocking more than the pretty. Without a reaction, artwork blends in with others and can be forgotten. However, shocking art that causes a reaction does not have to cross the lines of what is appropriate. *Myra* (1995) had a negative impact on the victims' relatives and exploited their grief. I prefer my art to have a deeper meaning than to be shocking for the sake of it, and I like people to have to think about the work.

Conceptual Art

Conceptual art is a movement in contemporary art that emerged in the 1960s and 70s as a major shift from traditional forms of artistic practice, which prioritise the ideas or concept behind a piece as more important than the visual appearance or it being aesthetically pleasing. In the words of art theorist Sol LeWitt in his 1967 *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, the concept is the most significant aspect of the work, and "all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand, and the execution is a perfunctory affair" (Lewitt, 1967). The material used for the work whether it's a sculpture, a photograph, a written statement, or an action is therefore less important to the reasoning behind it.

Conceptual artists often employ non-traditional media and methods to communicate ideas. Through doing this the viewers are challenged to engage not just with what is seen, but with what the work means and how it is constructed. For example, John Baldessari created a painting explaining '*what is painting*'; Baldessari specifies that artwork is a 'creation for the eye', an amalgamation of parts that cannot be defined in words but must be seen.



Figure 6: '*What is painting*' by John Baldessari (1966)

The conceptual art movement started partly as a reaction to the increasing commercialised art from after the war and as a challenge to modernist views that highlight form and technique. Influenced by philosophy, especially language theory and semiotics, it questioned the idea that meaning comes solely from the artwork itself. Instead, it suggested that meaning is shaped by context, language, and interpretation. Thinkers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, who stated "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein, 1922, 2009) inspired artists to explore how words and images affect how things are understood. Art critics Lucy Lippard and John Chandler wrote in their essay *The Dematerialization of Art* (1968) that contemporary

artists were starting to move away from making physical artworks and instead were creating art based on ideas. This changed how art was made, shown, and experienced.

The meaning of conceptual art within my artwork relates to the thought process behind my design practice. I like to question the reason behind creative decisions and the deeper meaning rather than to just make something look a certain way. As part of my process, I like to complete in-depth research. One area that interests me is why we gender objects mentally – why is a mug masculine and a wine glass feminine? Is it based on form, shape or what it is made from? Why are certain activities considered ‘manly’ and others ‘girly’? Why are there toys for boys and toys for girls? And why do we genderise these things from such a young age. I explored these questions in my ‘Tea Parties and Tools’ project that I completed last year, where I subverted gender expectations through making dainty, pretty porcelain tools and harsh, metallic teacups.

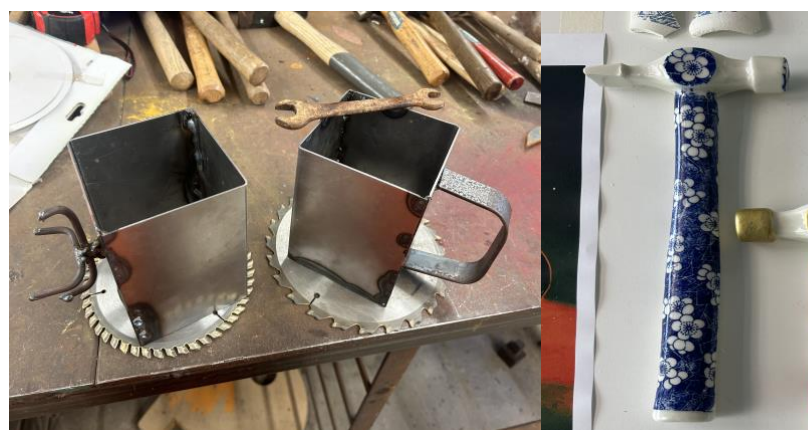


Figure 7: "Tea Parties and Tools" (2024)

When creating a product, I spend time considering what is more important, the surface pattern of the design or what the actual product is itself. Within my 'Love the Unlovable' project, I hand sculpted stereotypical hated animals and insects which are considered '*pests*' such as rats, slugs and pigeons and painted them with on popular prints like leopard print, bright coloured stripes/spots and florals. This subverted the natural disgust that is associated with animals considered '*pests*', through making them '*pretty*', changing people's perceptions.



Figure 8: 'Love the Unlovable' (2024)

An example of conceptual art is Marcel Duchamp's '*Fountain*' (1917) see figure 9. Although it came before the movement, it helped shape the core ideas underlying the conceptual art movement. Duchamp took a porcelain urinal, signed it "*R. Mutt*," and submitted it to an art show. By doing this, he challenged traditional ideas about what counts as art and raised questions about who gets to decide, where art is shown, and what the artist's purpose is; ideas that later conceptual artists would explore even more deeply.



Figure 9: Fountain (Marcel Duchamp, 1917)

Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965), see figure 10, shows a real chair, a photo of the same chair, and a dictionary definition of the word *chair*. Kosuth uses this setup to question, what really makes something a chair? Is it the object, the image, or the word. The artwork makes the audience think about how things are understood, not just by seeing them, but through language and ideas. It demonstrates that conceptual artists focus more on thinking and questioning than on making objects.



Figure 10: One and Three Chairs (Joseph Kosuth, 1965)

Sensory

Sensory art is a type of art that involves more than just looking; it uses some of the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell, and sometimes even taste.

Instead of only focusing on how something looks, sensory art invites people to feel, hear, and even smell the artwork. This kind of art creates a more personal and physical experience, helping people connect with the artwork in a deeper way. It often encourages people to move around, interact with the space, or even touch the materials, making them part of the experience instead of just observers. “Transcends the visual experience by enjoying art where every sense is engaged. The artistic movement subverts what it means to enjoy creativity” (Lancaster-Lennox, 2024). Sensory art is thereby an event that engages the senses, pulling in the viewer to not just see it but to feel it and immerse themselves within the process.

Sensory art can be seen as a reaction to the present contemporary digital world where screen time is on the rise. Increasingly the world moves at a fast pace and art needs to be interactive to engage the viewer and maintain their interest. Sensory art is an immersive experience and reminds the viewer to notice what is being felt, heard, and sensed with the whole body. It also makes art more open and welcoming because it doesn't require deep knowledge to enjoy; people of all ages and backgrounds can understand and enjoy it just by being present. This makes it especially useful in places such as schools or therapy settings especially people with sensory processing disorder, Autism or ADHD where people can benefit from engaging in a

hands-on way. The National Library of Medicine states that “5% to 16.5% of the general population have symptoms associated with sensory processing challenges” (Miller & Schoen, 2017). Overstimulation happens when the environment triggers a person’s senses too much, making them feel uncomfortable. Loud noises or bright lights can be too much all at once. This can be common for people with autism, anxiety, or who are sensory sensitive.

In the previous module, *Design and Make 4*, we were given a brief to develop a project inspired by elements of a piano. I chose to explore the sound element and set out to create a visual interpretation of sound. This led me to consider the emotional impact of losing, or never having, one of the senses. I became particularly interested in the experiences of individuals who are deafblind. According to *Sense*, “over 450,000 people in the UK were estimated to be deafblind in 2022, a number expected to rise to 610,000 by 2035” (Sense, 2025). To respond to this, I used cymatics, the science of visualizing sound vibrations to communicate sound through movement and texture. Through designing and building my own Chladni board, I was able to generate flowing sand patterns by playing piano music and altering the frequencies. These vibrations formed intricate, ever-changing visuals that represented sound in a tangible way.

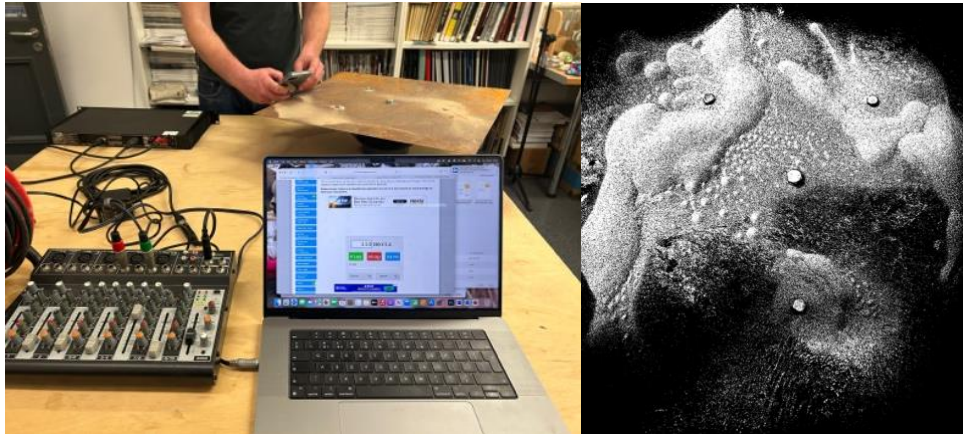


Figure11: Design and Make 4, Piano project (2024)

My goal was to create an artwork that felt inclusive and sensory-rich. I designed a lightweight, tactile glass cube featuring deeply engraved sandblasted surfaces, reminiscent of braille, to encourage touch. The piece also included sensory-friendly lighting that shifted in colour and a video backdrop of the sand patterns in motion, which could be played with or without sound depending on the audience's needs.



Figure 12: Design and Make 4, Piano project, glass cube (2024)

This allowed the installation to be accessible to people with different sensory abilities, creating a shared experience of sound beyond hearing.



Figure 13: Installation by Eva Fabregas, 'When Forms Come Alive' (2024)

The Hayward Gallery's exhibition 'When Forms Come Alive' created a multisensory journey through contemporary sculptures, surrounding the viewer. The 21 international artists made a variety of forms that appear to flow, bubble, spurt and sprawl. The exhibition engages multiple senses by challenging the limits; making hard materials feel soft and exploring formations that appear to be organic. Another thing that made this exhibition more sensory positive was scent and sound. Marguerite Humeau worked with beeswax, walnut wood and microcrystalline wax and Eva Fabregas played soft mechanical sounds in her 'Pumping' installation. "Passing through the exhibition is a complete sensory experience"(Moreno, 2024).

Despite the exhibition's emphasis on a sensory experience and the bond between sight and touch, the works are still considered valuable and fragile.

The artwork is generally restricted, and visitors are explicitly instructed not to

touch the pieces. However, staff handout samples to handle, providing insight into the material's textures. This allows visitors to have a deeper understanding of the artwork physically. To reflect on the importance of sensory art, tactile tours also known as touch tours are now becoming more popular. The tours are designed to make galleries and museums more accessible and engaging for individuals who are impaired.

Conclusion

The keywords and artworks explored throughout this essay are areas of particular interest to me and influential to my own art. For future research I would like to blend sensory art with conceptual art whilst including a shocking element. To explore this further I would like to go deeper into the idea of shock value and how art is perceived. The research will include a deeper look into artists that tap into some of the topics explored such as gender and how art is interpreted, in addition to practical research in my own art.

A potential question to explore could be: How do artists use sensory elements in contemporary art to draw out specific emotional or psychological reactions from viewers?

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