

THE PROBLEM OF INTENTIONALITY IN THE CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ARTS

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The discourse regarding intentionality and interpretation in analytic philosophy of art, although ample and lively, has concerned itself almost exclusively with the literary *medium*. Starting from a paper published by Hans Maes, I discuss the complications that may arise in straightforwardly applying current intentionalist strategies to the realm of the contemporary visual arts. I first present a detailed account of the difference between hypothetical intentionalism and moderate actual intentionalism which will help to better understand the nature of Maes's arguments in his paper. I then argue that the characteristics which shape the approach of moderate actual intentionalism cannot be accommodated by certain contemporary visual artworks. I will demonstrate how in certain contemporary artworks, should a viewer be interested in accepting actual intentions within her interpretation, she will have to do so with an extreme intentionalist posture rather than a moderate actual one.

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between artistic intentions and the role they play in interpretation is one that has been dealt with extensively in analytic philosophy. Different intentionalist interpretative strategies have been theorized in the last decades and the debate regarding the place artistic intentions hold in interpretation still warrants lively discussions in the analytic tradition.

Although the literature on the topic is broad, it has concerned itself almost exclusively on the literary *medium*.¹ The literature around intentionality seems to come up against a notable limit as it encounters the question of how the approaches it theorises can translate to other artistic media. Reference to art forms other than literature and poetry are made but are usually rare and underdeveloped. The frameworks and theories laid out so far have mainly been construed to work within the realm of literature. In the essay 'Intention,

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¹ See Gary Iseminger, ed., *Intention and Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992). The collection of essays edited by Gary Iseminger is arguably the most exhaustive anthology on intentionality and interpretation and all the essays comprising it deal almost exclusively with the literary medium. This attitude can also be witnessed in Robert Stecker, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: An Introduction* (Lanham, ML: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), particularly in the chapter 'Interpretation and the Problem of the Relevant Intention'.

Interpretation, and Contemporary Visual Art' Hans Maes presents one of the few attempts of framing the contemporary visual arts within the intentionalist debate. In his paper Maes argues (i) that the contemporary visual arts realm presents several examples where two different intentionalist interpretative strategies – *hypothetical intentionalism* and *moderate actual intentionalism* – lead to very different interpretations; (ii) that when this scenario presents itself, moderate actual intentionalism is the more convenient interpretative strategy to use.

Maes's claims are a promising start to explore the relationship between current intentionalist theories and their possible integration with the contemporary art world. Nevertheless, his conclusions underestimate the complexity of the issue they address and require further development.

First, I detail the differences between hypothetical and moderate actual intentionalism and describe how Maes uses an installation by contemporary visual artist Benedetto Pietromarchi to showcase how the latter is the more solid interpretative strategy. I then demonstrate how Maes's test case, on closer inspection, cannot be interpreted in accordance to the characteristics that underpin the functioning of moderate actual intentionalism.

I conclude by claiming (i) that Maes is actually advocating in favour of an interpretative strategy known as *extreme intentionalism*, rather than moderate actual intentionalism; (ii) that this misstep on Maes's part strays from the peculiar, and unique, way that certain contemporary visual artworks have of engendering their meaning.

II. FRAMING THE DEBATE

In his paper, Maes takes into consideration the two dominant interpretative strategies within the current discourse around intentionality: moderate (sometimes referred to as modest) actual intentionalism and hypothetical intentionalism. These two approaches found two of their major champions in the figures of Noël Carroll and Jerrold Levinson respectively.

In his essay 'Intention and Interpretation: One Last Look' Levinson discusses the nature of hypothetical intentionalism (HI). The interpretative aim of this approach is to create the best possible hypothesis regarding the artist's intended meanings behind a given work of art. The hypothetical intentionalist interpreter will take into account all the information publicly available on a given artwork – socio-historical context of production, genre, the artist's previous *oeuvre*, and so on – synthesize all these factors together and construct a well-educated hypothesis regarding what the artist might have intended to mean in creating the artistic object.

Although inferences on artistic intentions will be made, the hypothetical intentionalist will refrain from taking into consideration any direct information revealed by the artists themselves with regards to their artworks. As Levinson states, the reason for this is so that 'works of literature thus retain, in the last analysis, a certain autonomy from the actual mental processes of their creators during composition'.² By refraining from engaging with personal artistic statements regarding the work, said work will maintain a degree of autonomy and will be able to speak, for better or worse, on its own grounds, without the artist having to speak on its behalf. HI will always endorse the epistemically best interpretation – that is to say, the interpretation that is most likely aligned with the artistic intentions behind a work. Should an artwork be able to accommodate different interpretations all of which are equally epistemically valid, the hypothetical intentionalist will adopt the most aesthetically rich one – that is the most imaginative, creative and exhaustive interpretation.

In the paper 'Intention and Interpretation: The Debate Between Hypothetical and Actual Intentionalism' Noël Carroll presents a detailed description, and endorsement, of moderate actual intentionalism – which he refers to as modest actual intentionalism (AI).³ This approach, similarly to HI, claims that when interpreting a work an interpreter must look for the artistic intended meaning behind the artwork itself; but rather than construing *hypothetical intentions*, the AI supporter will look for *actual intentions*. Methodologically speaking, AI and HI are very similar. Biographies, socio-historical contexts, and all publicly available information on the artist are the inductive grounds that are utilized to infer the possible intended meanings of an artwork. Where AI separates itself as an approach from HI is with reference to how it handles authorial pronouncements made by artists about their works. As Carroll holds,

the hypothetical intentionalist permits the interpreter to use all the sorts of information publicly available to the intended, appropriate reader of a text, while debarring information not publicly available to said reader, such as interviews with the artist as well as his or her private papers. Since modest actual intentionalism is open to the circumspective use of such information, this is where hypothetical intentionalism and modest actual intentionalism part company most dramatically.⁴

² Jerrold Levinson, 'Intention and Interpretation: One Last Look', in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 237.

³ Different 'moderate' accounts of actual intentionalist positions have been theorized; for the purpose of this first part of the paper I will mainly focus on the one given by Carroll as it is the most referenced in the paper by Hans Maes that I will later analyse. For more information on the different moderate actual accounts see Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

⁴ Noël Carroll, 'Interpretation and Intention: The Debate between Hypothetical and Actual Intentionalism', in *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Noël Carroll (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 200.

While hypothetical intentionalists will stop short on artistic pronouncements with the aim of ensuring, from their perspective, a degree of autonomy to the work of art and the pursuit of hypothetical intentions; moderate actual intentionalists, in contrast, do allow for artistic pronouncements to be integrated into their interpretations as it aligns with their endeavour of recovering actual intentions. If any account is found which clarifies actual intentions regarding an artwork, the AI supporter will use it.

AI and HI have mainly been theorized with the literary form in mind: both Carroll's and Levinson's papers mainly reference literary texts as their field of demonstration. Carroll does suggest that the interpretative strategy he endorses could be generally applied to any art form – in his essay he brings as evidence to his position both the painter Frida Kahlo and the Rob Reiner movie *Stand by Me* – but both of these examples are briefly mentioned and consequentially participate feebly to his line of argument.

One instance in which a different artistic medium – contemporary visual art – becomes the focus of the debate between these two interpretative strategies can be found in Maes's paper 'Intention, Interpretation, and Contemporary Visual Art'.

In the first part of his paper Maes gives an account of the differences between HI and AI; he then proceeds to show how the current literature regarding the two approaches has had a hard time finding practical examples where the two strategies produce different interpretative results. The second part of the article concerns itself with two issues: showing that examples where HI and AI produce different interpretations can be plentiful if one turns to the realm of contemporary visual art; and proving that should this situation present itself, AI is to be adopted as the favoured interpretative strategy.

Maes states at the beginning of his paper: 'Proponents of HI and AI will indeed usually reach the same conclusion regarding the meaning of a particular work of art.'⁵ This state of affairs, he claims, changes drastically if one were to start looking into the realm of the contemporary visual arts, which as Maes correctly points out is 'a domain of art that has been curiously neglected in the debate.'⁶ As test cases where the two interpretative strategies do not align in their final interpretations, Maes presents a painting by Ghada Amer and an installation by sculptor Benedetto Pietromarchi. While the Amer painting serves well the point Maes is making, Pietromarchi's work presents some complications which are worth exploring.

⁵ Hans Maes, 'Intention, Interpretation, and Contemporary Visual Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (2010): 122.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

The untitled installation by Pietromarchi was composed as part of an exhibition entitled *Reconstruction #1*, held in Sudeley Castle in 2006. The untitled piece was comprised of two oversized light bulbs, placed on two pedestals, glowing in the dungeons of the castle. Maes gives an account of the work's actual intended meaning as described by Pietromarchi himself in an interview with the *Reconstruction #1* exhibition curator and art critic Brooke McGowan:

'Some light bulbs can last up to eighty years,' the artist explains. [...] However, Pietromarchi's creations will last over a century, because of both the exceptional thickness of the filament and the low wattage used... 'It is about childhood' he states, pronouncing that the tracing and curling lines of the glowing filaments evoke for the artist 'a memory that stays with you longer.'⁷

To counter this explanation, Maes presents three interpretations which could be considered valid HI readings of the installation. These three interpretations all draw from different inductive grounds which hypothetical intentionalists would usually use to construe an analysis (history of the medium used, information on the previous body of work by the artist, historical context of creation, and so on).

The three different HI interpretations made by Maes himself offer three different readings of Pietromarchi's work, which could be broadly summed as: (i) the untitled piece is an installation about the modern myth of technology; (ii) the untitled piece is a representation of a harmonious union which is destined to end; (iii) the untitled piece is a reflection on the dynamic relationship between the Dark Ages and Enlightenment, hence a commentary on Kant's essay 'What Is Enlightenment?', which was an inspiration to Pietromarchi himself.

On Maes's account, HI proponents would have to endorse interpretation (iii) as it is epistemically valid and aesthetically the richest: taking into account the broadest range of information the artwork presents, from physical traits to interests concerning its creator, and uniting this information with a creative reading of the work's physical properties.

Interpretation (iii), Maes continues, is very far off from the pronouncements made by Pietromarchi himself on the nature of his untitled piece. This example shows HI and AI producing very different results, allowing Maes to prove his first point. He then claims that to favour interpretation (iii) to the one made available by Pietromarchi would appear to be 'a very counterintuitive stance that few interpreters would support.'⁸

⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁸ Ibid., 136.

Maes concludes his essay by stating that in the contemporary visual arts world it is very common to find works where AI and HI would produce very different results. He also adds that without any guidance provided by the artist, many works of contemporary visual art would strike viewers as being quite mysterious, concluding that in such cases resorting to AI would be the most advisable and intuitive solution.

III. AI OR EI?

While detailing all the differences between HI and AI, the points Maes makes are all correct. When a work can accommodate different interpretations but there is an artistic pronouncement regarding the intended meaning behind it made by the artist, the moderate actual intentionalist will consider the artist's voice the authoritative one. From this standpoint, his test case appears to be partially proving his point.

There is one principle, though, within the AI methodology, that Maes is very quick to settle: the notion of failed artistic intentions. As Maes quotes: 'When the author appears to have some meaning in mind that is incompatible with or unsupported by what is written, both HI and AI will conclude that the author has failed to realize her intention.'⁹ This concept is revealed to be a vital aspect for AI and should be better analysed in order to understand how AI behaves when confronted with artworks pertaining to the visual arts.

If we go back to Carroll's essay, we are told:

The modest actual intentionalist argues that the correct interpretation of a text is the meaning of the text that is compatible with the author's actual intention. [...] The intentions of authors that the modest actual intentionalist takes seriously are only those intentions of the author that the linguistic/literary unit can support (given the conventions of language and literature).¹⁰

In Carroll's eyes, supporters of AI will take into consideration only pronouncements on intentions which align themselves with the formal embodiments of the artwork – in this case, because he is specifically talking about literature, his reference is to the 'linguistic/literary unit'. He later returns to this concept with a rather simplistic but effective example: 'Where the author wrote "green", but intended "black", the modest actual intentionalist will not say the text means black.'¹¹ Where text and intent appear to be incompatible, conventions of language have the ultimate judgement with regards to meaning.

⁹ Ibid., 123.

¹⁰ Carroll, 'Interpretation and Intention', 198.

¹¹ Ibid., 206.

In this way, Carroll attempts to safeguard against allowing the stated declarations of artists to exert full sovereign authority regarding the meaning of an artworks. 'Declaration of intent' is not enough: intended meanings must comply with the artwork's formal traits. A poet cannot claim that her poem is about a given theme simply because she chooses to baptise it with that given theme. The poem itself, in its linguistic units, needs to back up the intended meaning the poet wants it to convey.

In the methodology of AI, we find what could be called a *safeguard mechanism*. Authors/artists have a right to make pronouncements regarding the meanings of their artworks and in many cases these pronouncements are welcomed and useful. At the same time, AI looks to shield itself from devolving into an interpretative strategy which passively agrees with what artists claim about their work. AI demands the work to stand also on its own feet, so to speak, and argue 'itself' in favour of its intended meaning: only if the work in itself 'agrees' with the pronounced intended meaning is the artistic pronouncement taken seriously into account.

This safeguard mechanism is employed to separate AI from another more extreme interpretative strategy, which Carroll refers to as the extreme form of actual intentionalism and which is named absolute or extreme intentionalism (EI). This approach, which finds its roots in E. D. Hirsch's theory of interpretation developed in his work *Validity in Interpretation*,¹² is generally accepted as a theory which 'holds that a work's meaning and actual author's intentions with regards to the work's meaning are logically equivalent'.¹³

EI is an interpretative approach which is looked at with much suspicion and that has gathered a very sparse number of supporters. One of the rare endorsements of the theory can be found in Kathleen Stock's recent book *Only Imagine: Fiction, Interpretation, and Imagination*. In her introduction she addresses the general attitude that specifically analytic philosophers have towards EI: 'In the work of these philosophers and others, a core set of objections to extreme intentionalism tends to get rehearsed, presented as if they ruled it out as a non-starter, obviously and definitively'.¹⁴ Proof of this distrust in EI can be found also in Carroll's essay:

This variant of actual intentionalism is clearly unacceptable, since it leads to what has been called 'Humpty-Dumpty-ism': the idea that an author could make a work mean

¹² See E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967).

¹³ Livingston, *Art and Intention*, 139.

¹⁴ Kathleen Stock, *Only Imagine: Fiction, Interpretation, and Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.

anything simply because he wills it so – as Humpty Dumpty tries to do when he says to Alice that ‘glory’ means ‘there’s a knockdown argument’.¹⁵

AI separates itself from EI, not by undercutting artistic pronouncements, but by turning to the work of art to *ascertain* said artistic pronouncements. The main preoccupation AI has when accepting artistic pronouncements is to make sure that they do not create a situation of Humpty-Dumpty-ism. The artist cannot simply, much like Humpty-Dumpty, reassign the meaning of linguistic/literary units: a poet cannot write a poem and arbitrarily endow meaning to words or verses, so that they can harmonize with the overarching semantic intent of the poem. The work must stand on its own. The AI interpreter grants herself the possibility of evaluating whether actual intentions are realized in the text or not.

The concern with the phenomenon of Humpty-Dumpty-ism is frequently addressed by other proponents or sympathisers of AI. In his essay ‘Actual Intentionalism vs. Hypothetical Intentionalism’, Gary Iseminger defends the position of actual intentionalism as opposed to hypothetical intentionalism. While the prefix ‘moderate’ or ‘modest’ is not utilized to describe the approach he is subscribing to, we quickly gather that his take on actual intentionalism shares much in common with the moderate branch rather than the extreme branch. Iseminger responds to what he names the ‘Humpty Dumpty Objection’, which might challenge the strategy he is endorsing. In his words: ‘Actual intentionalism, as I have construed it, does not, I think, obliterate the distinction between what was said and what someone was trying to say. The meaning of the work [...] is the meaning *compatible with the text* that the author intended.’¹⁶ On a similar note, Paisley Livingston, in advocating for an approach that he refers to as ‘partial intentionalism’ – always ascribable to the AI family – introduces the concept of ‘meshing’. In his account, in order to integrate authorial intentions within an interpretation of a text, artefact, or performance, said intentions must ‘mesh’ with the conventions of the artistic language of the medium being utilized, so that ‘the minimal (and I should think default) standard of success being simply that the intentions are compatible and “mesh” with the linguistic and conventional meanings of the text or artefact taken in its target or intended context’.¹⁷ As Maes claims, Livingston does not offer a very precise definition of the concept of ‘meshing’ and how it works;¹⁸ nevertheless

¹⁵ Carroll, ‘Interpretation and Intention’, 198.

¹⁶ Gary Iseminger, ‘Actual Intentionalism vs. Hypothetical Intentionalism’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996): 321, emphasis in the original.

¹⁷ Livingston, *Art and Intention*, 155.

¹⁸ See Hans Maes, ‘Challenging Partial Intentionalism’, *Journal of Visual Arts Practice* 7 (2008): 85–94.

the *role* that 'meshing' plays in his interpretative theory is easier to intuit. Much like Carroll and Iseminger, Livingston is presenting a means through which the interpreter can evaluate whether artistic intentions are realised within a given work of art. 'Meshing' is a means of establishing whether actual intentions are consistent or not with the communicative units that comprise the artwork.

Carroll, Iseminger, and Livingston all advocate in favour of slightly different methodologies, but all these methodologies are variants of AI. One trait that unifies them, and which is vital to all AI strategies, is that each are concerned with ensuring the artwork be compatible with the artistic pronouncement on intent made on it.

These methodologies slightly vary with regards to how lenient they are in accepting artistic pronouncements as realized or not. The 'compatibility view' employed by Iseminger makes it easier for artistic pronouncement to be considered as successfully realized if compared to Livingston's 'meshing' requirements. For reasons of space limitation, I cannot go into detail regarding these differences, but the main point to secure for the purpose of this paper is the idea that safeguard mechanisms against Humpty-Dumpty-ism are an ever-present concern of any moderate actual intentionalist account.¹⁹

The work of ascertainment attributed to these safeguard mechanisms can be carried out in the literary medium, but proves to be a rather tricky endeavour if one translates this practice to contemporary works of visual art. Karen E. Gover in her response paper 'What Is Humpty-Dumptyism in Contemporary Visual Arts? A Reply to Hans Maes' highlights the complications that emerge around this issue and puts forth two interconnected problems. The first concern revolves around whether it is possible to evaluate if an artist fails to achieve her intentions. Here is Gover talking about Pietromarchi's installation and its meaning as presented by the artist himself: 'How do we distinguish this sculpture from a failed attempt at artistic expression? If we are to accept that Pietromarchi's sculpture means what he says it does, then it seems that the possibility of a failed artistic intention is ruled out.'²⁰

The second concern, a by-product of the first one, has to do with how the medium of literature and the medium of the visual arts work differently: 'Whereas literary works, in so far as they are linguistic utterances, to some extent (and quite literally) speak for themselves, [...] there is no presumption that the object [a visual art object] can mean something on its own, as

¹⁹ For a more in-depth analysis on this aspect of AI see *ibid*.

²⁰ Karen E. Gover, 'What Is Humpty-Dumptyism in Contemporary Visual Art? A Reply to Maes', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52 (2012): 174.

a linguistic utterance would.²¹ In short, Gover points out that linguistic utterances – what Carroll refers to as linguistic/literary units – have a strong tethering connection with the concept they refer to. Because of this, evaluating whether the intended meaning of a literary work is achieved or not is a possible, albeit difficult endeavour. In contrast, Gover concludes that artworks such as Pietromarchi's installation are 'not utterances in any conventional sense, and therefore belong to a different artistic category';²² an 'artistic category' which cannot be utilized to settle the argument between AI and HI which has developed around the concept of utterance.

Gover's conclusions concentrate on the supposed incompatibility between the intentionalist approaches canvassed so far and the contemporary visual art realm. But, as she points out, 'it remains unclear to what extent we can transfer the interpretative norms and practices of readymade artworks back to a debate that chiefly concerns textual interpretation'.²³ In order to start understanding how readymade objects, and more generally contemporary visual artworks, can enter the debate on intentionality it is important to begin by asking the correct questions.

With regards to the relationship between moderate actual intentionalism and the visual arts, the pivotal concern that needs to be addressed is whether what was referred to as the process of ascertainment can be applied to the visual arts or not. Does the vocabulary that comprises the visual arts allow us to evaluate whether intended meanings are achieved or not?

The next section will be concerned with why such a process of ascertainment in the visual arts might be problematic.

IV. ASCERTAINMENT IN THE CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ARTS

Maes does not see any problem in associating Pietromarchi's installation with the idea of childhood and memories, claiming that 'if someone were to ask me what Pietromarchi's installation is about, now that I know his underlying intention, I would say that it is about memories and childhood. This seems the only reasonable answer'.²⁴ Similarly, the art critic Brooke McGowan also endorses the statement by the artist, reporting his interview in the catalogue and expanding on it. There is simply nothing that strikes as particularly incoherent or unfathomable about the installation embodying in an interconnected way the notions of childhood and memory.

²¹ Ibid., 180.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 178.

²⁴ Maes, 'Intention, Interpretation, and Contemporary Visual Art', 136.

Maes rightfully claims that the realm of the contemporary visual arts is not an intuitive panorama to navigate. This is acknowledged also by Arthur Danto, as explained in Maes's paper:

When visiting contemporary art galleries, it frequently happens, says Danto, that 'without the explanation we have no way of knowing what we are looking at'. If artists do not inform the audience about their intentions, the audience is often left puzzled and disoriented.²⁵

Especially during the 1960s, visual art experienced a moment of creative expansion with regards to its means of expression, resulting in an exponential development of its vocabulary. With groups such as Fluxus, Neo-Dada, or the Conceptual Artists, readymade objects, for one, established themselves as major participants within the visual arts' language.²⁶ the 1960s witnessed the development of a broad range of new styles, many of which blurred the difference between everyday objects and artworks,²⁷ making the contemporary artworld very tricky to decipher.

The different movements that came out of that era pushed the boundaries of what requisites were needed in order to fit under the broad definition of visual arts²⁸ and go to show why the 1960s came to be considered the starting point for the so called 'post-medium' phase in art.²⁹ One of the results of the post-medium era was a stretching of the semantic possibilities that both the materials and images used or created could embody. While not necessarily a common practice, the idea of associating materials or images with arbitrary meanings, personal to the artists, became a viable option. Pietromarchi's installation, which is comprised of readymade objects which have attached to

²⁵ Ibid., 133.

²⁶ Readymade objects are just one facet of this expansion and artists quickly realized that the possibilities were far vaster. For example, Judd's minimalist art practice was concerned with the creation of 'Specific Objects': works which were thought to be neither paintings nor sculptures but unique and 'specific' to themselves, while movements such as Land Art worked directly on the artist's physical surroundings. For a more detailed explanation of the impact of 1960s art and the paroxysm of styles it witnessed see Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

²⁷ For more on the relationship between a work of art and mere object see Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld', *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964): 571–84.

²⁸ What will be referred to in this paper from now on with the broad term of contemporary visual arts are to be considered all the artistic experiences that developed during and as a result of the 1960s revolution: this is to include painting and sculpture but also subgenres such as Performance Art, Body Art, Land Art, and so on.

²⁹ For a more detailed description of the post-medium condition of Art I suggest Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

them highly personal significances, lives in this tradition, but is surely not the first work of art to embody its meaning in such a way.

Joseph Beuys used fat and felt as a means of accounting to the human condition and the action of healing, while Louise Bourgeois's spider sculptures reconnected the image of the spider to the mother figure. These were not some obscure lines of artistic research: Beuys's felt and Bourgeois's spiders are now some of the most iconic materials and images of the contemporary art scene, and are examples of highly idiosyncratic vocabularies created by the artists themselves. Both these artists are good starting points to explore the notion of failed intentions within the contemporary visual art realm.

Louise Bourgeois is considered one of the most influential artists of the Post-World War II era. Her work is known for being informed by her childhood experiences and for dealing with deeply personal motifs and traumas. This has resulted in her *oeuvre*, which spans over sixty years, developing reoccurring images: including phalli, spiders, and bulbous forms, all of which present correlated meanings which are far from being intuitive.

One of Bourgeois's most notorious works is entitled *The Destruction of the Father*. Comprised of several differently sized bulb like forms, made of plaster and latex, the sculpture is placed within a box that opens its 'fourth wall' allowing the viewer to look inside; the whole piece is illuminated by a theatrical and menacing red light. The only indication we get about the subject matter of the work is in the title, which is actually thoroughly faithful to the work's intended meaning. *The Destruction of the Father* is an account of an imagined childhood fantasy the artist had of killing and consequentially devouring her father at the dinner table with her family. Bourgeois gives us the description of what is happening in the piece:

This piece is basically a table, the awful, terrifying family dinner table headed by the father who sits and gloats. And the others, the wife, the children, what can they do? They sit there, in silence. The mother, of course, tries to satisfy the tyrant, her husband. The children are full of exasperation. [...] So, in exasperation, we grabbed the man, threw him on the table, dismembered him and proceeded to devour him.³⁰

The artist herself reveals the actual intentions concerning the communicative purpose of the work.³¹ Similarly to the Pietromarchi installation, it seems like

³⁰ Frances Morris, ed., *Louise Bourgeois* (London: Tate, 2007), 102.

³¹ Different intentions can fuel the creation of an artwork: these could be what Levinson defines as categorial intentions (intentions which establish to which specific art form a given work belongs to); or motivational intentions (what are the reasons that lead an artist to create a specific work); or unconscious intentions (intentions unavailable to the artist during the creative process). The focus of this paper concerns

a hardly achievable task to recover Bourgeois's intended meaning by simply relating to the formal properties of the work. The title gives us a direction, and in this case a rather clear one, but the question that is being addressed in this instance is whether it is possible to ascertain intended meanings through the physical embodiments of the artworks. As Carroll writes further on in his essay, underscoring AI's attitude towards artistic intentions, 'recall that the modest actual intentionalist is not using this evidence to claim that a text means something that the written text fails to support. He employs the author's intention to fix a meaning to the text that the text could have.'³²

Could *The Destruction of the Father* have the meaning that Bourgeois assigns it, to put it in the terms of Carroll's quote? Can it be ascertained whether what Carroll would call the linguistic units – which for clarity we can here call 'visual units' – endorse the intended meaning of the artwork?

Surely, if a viewer were aware of Bourgeois's tumultuous relationship with her father, of how the plaster bulb forms were usually associated with living beings, and of her constant research through her art of coming to terms with childhood traumas, *The Destruction of the Father* would probably become more intuitive. But it would become more intuitive on the basis of her own experience and artistic language. The question we are really dealing with, when trying to apply AI to a work like *The Destruction of the Father* is: if an artist is creating her own bespoke visual vocabulary, does it make sense to marshal whether this vocabulary is arguing in favour of its intended meaning?

One might argue that in Bourgeois's case the visual units are not readymade objects, like in Pietromarchi's installation. Bourgeois's bulb-like plaster figures, not being readymade objects, and consequentially not having any kind of preconceived meanings attached to them, find an easier time in being endowed with new metaphorical significance.

Contrarily, Pietromarchi's light bulbs, in lieu of the very fact of being light bulbs, already create a more grounded semantic tethering towards a pool of commonly shared ideas or concepts: a viewer could associate the lightbulb with the act of thinking, illumination, hope, and so forth. Could this possibly

actual intentions serving the *communicative* purposes of the artwork: the intended meanings. For this reason, unless the 'extra-communicative' categories of intentions, such as the ones just mentioned, actively and intentionally participate in the construction of intended meanings of a given work, they fall out of the area the paper is discussing. Similarly, attempting to recover possible psychological meanings, consciously unavailable to the artist, would undermine the purpose of attempting to understand the working of *actual* intentions within the visual arts: for this reason, I will not be taking unconscious intentions into account either.

³² Carroll, 'Interpretation and Intention', 202.

make it more realistic to evaluate whether the installation fails or succeeds to argue in favour of its artistic intended meaning?

The problem with such a line of argument is that if we scout the panorama of the contemporary visual arts, it is easy to come across artists who have used readymade objects to create their own bespoke web of significances. Joseph Beuys, another influential artist of the Post-World War II era, has gone so far as to make up a story to bestow upon given materials new symbolic meaning.

In 1964 Beuys published his fictitious autobiography entitled *Life Course / Work Course*. Within this text, Beuys explores his own development as an artist. One of the most famous passages involves an enigmatic account of his plane crash in the Soviet Union, after which he was found and nurtured by Tatar people, who proceeded in wrapping him in fat and felt, saving his life. This made-up story serves as a key through which one can read the reoccurring use of fat and felt in his art practice, usually seen as materials imbued with life and healing power.

The question remains, can the AI interpreter ascertain the correctness of the 'visual units' that compose the vocabulary of Beuys's *oeuvre*? Do fat and felt serve their communicative purpose if Beuys himself regulates how they should be read in the first place?

The question could be asked: when we come to understand Beuys's rescue by the Tatar people as fictitious, does the endowment he made to fat and felt collapse? Had the necessity to create a made-up story been the only means the artist had to bestow upon fat and felt their new symbolic meaning? Possibly yes; but this hardly seems to be the case. Rather, Beuys is working within a visual language that allows him to make such an association. His narrative invention concerning how fat and felt become stand-ins for healing is inventive, theatrical, and mystical but by no means necessary for the materials to acquire their new metaphoric meaning.

The idea of imbuing a given image with a deeper layer of meaning is nothing new in the visual art form. Still lifes, skulls, and doves, for example, all participated in creating a very precise and nuanced pictorial grammar in Renaissance Art. These images when painted did not argue strictly in favour of themselves; they were rather a means through which nobler and morally virtuous concepts could be conveyed.

In his 1969 essay 'Art after Philosophy', the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth, while discussing the condition of contemporary art, states that the fact that 'the language forms that the artist frames his propositions in are often "private" codes or languages is an inevitable outcome of art's freedom from

morphological constrictions.’³³ The ‘freedom from morphological constrictions’ that Kosuth addresses reconnects to the post-medium era that the visual arts entered in the 1960s. The concept of artistic medium allows, amongst other things, to encrypt and secure the modes of communication – what Kosuth would describe as a ‘morphology’ – within the medium itself. The contemporary visual arts, in completely exiting the need to pertain to a specific artistic medium (painting, sculpture, drawing, and so on) and entering this post-medium phase, allowed artists to explore materials, objects, and practices which were, and arguably still are, de-regulated in terms of the meanings they can articulate.

Artists such as Beuys, Bourgeois, and (as also Gover suggests) possibly Pietromarchi are working within this spirit: giving objects or materials highly idiosyncratic metaphorical connections to other meanings, and they are doing so because the visual art realm has entered a state where it is free from ‘morphological constrictions’, a post-medium era. These artists are not working within a system of symbols or allegories that are regulated and codified. Rather than dipping in a shared pool of symbolic knowledge, as Renaissance iconography did, they are inventing one *ex novo* which satisfies their own needs, sensibilities, and experiences.

Going back to Pietromarchi’s statement on his work:

Pietromarchi’s creations will last over a century, because of both the exceptional thickness of the filament and the low wattage used... ‘It is about childhood’ he states, pronouncing that the tracing and curling lines of the glowing filaments evoke for the artist ‘a memory that stays with you longer.’³⁴

Can we ascertain whether the association between the longer life of the light bulbs he installed and the longer lifespan that childhood memories have compared to other memories, is achieved or not? To say it as Carroll, is Pietromarchi fixing ‘a meaning to the text that the text could have’? Gover seems unconvinced by the description given by Pietromarchi on his own work, finding the sculptor’s pronouncements ‘nonsensical’, ‘underdeveloped’, and ‘unconvincing.’³⁵ Nevertheless, if Pietromarchi’s sculpture inhabits the same world as Bourgeois’s and Beuys’s works, it would appear tricky, to say the least, trying to explain why the intentions behind, for example, *The Destruction of the Father* are realised – as the impact the work has had appears to

³³ Joseph Kosuth, ‘Art after Philosophy,’ in *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966–1990*, ed. Gabriele Guercio (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 20.

³⁴ Maes, ‘Intention, Interpretation, and Contemporary Visual Art’, 131.

³⁵ Gover, ‘What Is Humpty-Dumptyism in Contemporary Visual Art?’, 175.

confirm – while Pietromarchi's pronouncements on his untitled piece are 'nonsensical'.³⁶

Pietromarchi's chain of semantic association is extremely idiosyncratic, obscure, and verging on the convoluted, but talking about it in terms of being achieved or not does not appear a profitable option. Evaluating whether an intended meaning is realised or not threatens to devolve into a vicious circle with certain works that form a part of the contemporary art panorama. If the contemporary visual arts' 'morphology' has been freed and does not have any constrictions, how can one evaluate whether it is being employed correctly?

The question of whether an artist can fail to realise her intentions, at least in terms of the *meaning* the artwork is articulating, falls flat. With certain contemporary visual artworks, whether artistic intentions are realised or not becomes a query that, realistically, can only be answered by the artists themselves rather than by interpreters.³⁷

Asking whether intentions comply to the 'conventions of language' functions insofar as the 'language' used presents an anchoring to a grammar and syntax, together with a shared pool of concepts and means of utilising them – as 'language' does for literature. If artists such as Bourgeois, Beuys, and Pietromarchi are creating their own vocabulary, the idea of utilising the conventions of language – which in this instance we can call 'visual language' – to ascertain whether intentions are realised or not becomes a futile endeavour.

This does not entail that every visual contemporary artwork presents formal properties which make intended meanings virtually impossible to intuit without artistic pronouncements. Tracey Emin's installation *My Bed* is an account of the degree of confusion, disorientation, and decay the artist's life had built up to:

In 1998 I had a complete, absolute breakdown and I spent four days in bed. I was asleep and semi-unconscious. When I eventually did get out of bed, I had some water, went back, looked at the bedroom and couldn't believe what I could see. This absolute mess and decay of my life. And then I saw the bed out of that context of this tiny, tiny

³⁶ Gover opens up this problem in the very last paragraph of her essay but does not expand on it as it is not the main concern of her paper.

³⁷ Claiming that the standards of success in realising intentions in certain artworks can only be evaluated by the artists themselves does not equate to saying that every artwork belonging to such a category is necessarily 'successful' in broader terms. By acknowledging that Pietromarchi's installation *is* in fact about childhood, one is not making any real considerations on the merit of the work nor is she encountering it in a deeply critical manner.

bedroom and I saw it in this big white space. I realised that I had to move the bed and everything into the gallery space.³⁸

The installation which is a reproduction of the state of her bed when she came to this realisation, embodies perfectly this feeling; it argues clearly and self-evidently in favour of its intended meaning.

Another example is Martin Creed's installation titled *Work No. 26030 – UNDERSTANDING*. This piece can be found on the banks of the East River in Brooklyn. Inspired by a very personal moment the artist had with his step-daughter, the word-installation is a revolving red and white neon sign which spells out the word 'UNDERSTANDING'. Contrarily to many of the artist's works, there is no spoof, irony, or sense of playfulness in this piece. Understanding – in its theatrical but equally graceful layout – is arguing exactly in favour of the word it spells out. As Creed states: 'It has to do with trying to communicate, like with my step-daughter originally. But now for me it's also to do with the state of the world, these stupid wars, and the fact that it obviously all comes down to understanding.'³⁹

To go back to the initial question: would it make sense to evaluate whether visual artworks ascertain their intended meanings, *de facto* allowing them to be interpreted with an AI approach? As just seen, certain contemporary artworks thrive on how viscerally connected intended meanings are with their physical embodiments. Degradation, confusion, and decay are clearly embodied in Emin's *My Bed*. The same could be said about Creed's work: *Work No. 26030 – UNDERSTANDING* argues exactly in favour of the word it is spelling out; the piece presents none of the ironic agenda or ambiguous weight which usually infuses Creed's works.

Through the interviews previously quoted, the moderate actual intentionalist could recover the actual intentions behind both works, but more importantly she could ascertain that said intended meanings conform clearly with both works' physical embodiments. AI, in short, could be adopted as a strategy to interpret Creed's and Emin's works.

But informed viewers must be aware that the contemporary visual arts also grant artists the opportunity of creating highly personalised visual vocabularies, where actual intentions would not be recoverable through the mere

³⁸ Tracey Emin, 'Tracey Emin – My Bed | TateShots', YouTube video, 3:01, posted by 'Tate', 2 April 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uv04ewpiqSc>.

³⁹ Martin Creed, 'Martin Creed, Poet of the Everyday | Brilliant Ideas Ep. 36', YouTube video, 24:15, posted by 'Bloomberg', 12 September 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aG41M6lYNRM&t=267s>.

engagements of the formal traits of the artworks. Ascertainment of intended meaning, which is a requisite for AI to be adopted as a strategy, really cannot be employed with such works.

If an artwork is working in accordance to a morphology which is created by the artist herself, as contemporary artworks have the possibility to do, does it make sense to put it on the stand and evaluate whether its visual units are arguing in favour of its intended meaning? The question of ascertainment of intentions loses part of its grip once it enters the contemporary visual arts realm.

Different supporters of moderate actual intentionalism, in different ways, are all concerned with the idea that the work must back up its intended meaning: as Creed and Emin's do. The means through which this safeguard mechanism engenders itself may vary – Iseminger's compatibility view, Livingston's mesh theory, Carroll's account to literary unit – but its general concern is always the same.

AI separates itself from EI insofar as it grants itself the privilege of ascertaining whether a given artistic object, in its constitutive/visual units, *successfully embodies* the supposed intended meaning. This mechanism can work insofar as there is a shared framework within which artists and interpreters are operating: in the case of literature this framework is literary language.

Within the contemporary visual arts' panorama, there are works which create their own language and morphology: their own frameworks through which they can be understood. Bourgeois, Beuys, and Pietromarchi offer examples of this 'category' of works and AI, which allows only actual intentions which can be ascertained, cannot accommodate them.

The viewer interested in taking actual intentions into account, with works such as *The Destruction of the Father* or Pietromarchi's *Untitled* piece, will hence need to adopt an interpretative posture which subscribes to EI rather than AI. Extreme intentionalism (EI), an approach which, as mentioned, draws much antipathy within literary theory and analytic philosophy, finds new life and scope within the contemporary visual arts, becoming the only means through which actual intentions can be integrated in the interpretative process.

In certain cases, when speaking the visual language, it can become virtually impossible for an interpreter to evaluate whether an object fails or succeeds to realise its intended meaning – a process that underpins and to an extent defines AI as theorized so far. When such cases present themselves, as in Pietromarchi's case, AI's purpose to exist disappears in the first place.

Maes, when using Pietromarchi's sculpture as a test case is therefore arguing in favour of EI, simply for the fact that AI collapses into it. Pietromarchi's work is

communicating through a framework that is virtually unascertainable, consequentially making itself unavailable to being interpreted through an AI strategy which is underpinned by that same ascertainment process.

While AI can be adopted as an interpretative strategy with some works of contemporary art (Creed's and Emin's), it cannot accommodate others (Bourgeois's and Pietromarchi's). The explanation for this state of things, as I have tried to demonstrate, lies behind the very nature of the visual language. Being freed from 'morphological constrictions', as Kosuth puts it, and working within the post-medium era, artists are granted the opportunity to, as it were, create their own visual vocabulary and grammar in each of their works. When an artwork communicates its meaning through a self-regulated language – as for example by reconnecting lightbulbs to childhood memories – strategies such as AI are drained of purpose and inevitably stretch into EI.

Moderate actual intentionalism holds a valuable place as an approach in literature, but is partially undermined the moment it enters, or tries to enter, the realm of the contemporary visual arts. Works such as Pietromarchi's and Bourgeois's showcase the extent to which the visual language can articulate itself: an extent so broad that AI cannot encompass it in its entirety. From this standpoint, perhaps, extreme intentionalism in the visual arts is not as ill-advised as it may appear to be in literary form.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has discussed how certain frameworks which comprise the vast field of intentionality in interpretation require adjustments if they are to be applied to the realm of contemporary visual art. Moving from Maes's paper, it has shown how moderate actual intentionalism, a highly respected interpretative approach in literary theory, can collapse into extreme intentionalism when entering the contemporary visual arts realm.

Maes's paper and Gover's response represent two of the few attempts which deal exclusively with intentionality and the visual arts. All the implications and sometimes inner incongruities that the two papers present must be read not as failures on the authors' part, but rather as the result of having hardly any theory built around how intentionality behaves in this (post-)medium.

The possibility for artists to create a personal vocabulary which grants access to the reading of their art, together with the possibility of having artworks which engage almost exclusively with ideas and concepts, put contemporary visual art objects in a unique position with regard to their relationship with artistic intentions. Because of this development it is essential that current theoretical work on intentionality, if applied to the contemporary

visual arts realm, be tailored and adjusted: possibly creating a whole new framework.

This paper has been an initial modest attempt to construct such a framework.

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