

# Generative Art: Multi-Modal Meanings

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## Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of *multi-modality*, drawing upon recent work in the field of social semiotics [1] in an attempt to theorise how art generated through a variety of media deployed in a variety of modes may be understood through semiotic principles applicable to them all.

*Medium* is defined as the means of expression (material and other technologies); *mode* is defined as the manner of expression. Case studies from the field of sculpture are illustrated.

## Introduction

In the general context of the series of Generative Art conferences held between 1998 and the present, two directions of research appear salient: one concerned with methods of production, in particular the construction of algorithms which generate art and design forms; the other concerned with exploration of suitable areas for the application of such generative tools.

Both of these directions have facilitated exciting and extraordinary contributions to knowledge.

I would like to suggest a third direction in which research may prove beneficial to our common goals. A direction of inquiry into the concept I shall term *reception*: how is art, generated multimodally, received in social context and how is its meaning negotiated?

The semiotic principles applicable to the analysis of multimodal artworks derive from Ferdinand de Saussure's [2] seminal work theorising the communication process as entailing a series of paradigmatic choices of signs (e.g. visual elements) combined syntagmatically according to the rules of the code shared by sender and receiver. Awareness of the importance of theorising such communication *within a social context* was raised by Mikhail Bakhtin and Pavel Medvedev. [3]

Bakhtin and his circle were proposing a reassessment of Saussure, who had chosen to foreground the structure of language (*langue*) rather than speech (*parole*), and a synchronic analysis of language rather than a diachronic one. Bakhtin re-engaged the poles of these dichotomies, and treated them dialectically – as oppositions between terms which depend upon each other for their meaning. By doing so, he facilitated the study of communication within a *dialogical* context. [4]

Bakhtin and his colleagues effectively resolved the antimony that Saussure's separation of *langue* and *parole* had presented, and thus laid the foundations upon which a *social semiotics*

may be constructed. Social semiotics theorises the relationship between codes of communication and the contexts of situation in which they operate. He and Pavel Medvedev asked:

How, within the unity of the artistic construction, is the direct material presence of the work, its here and now, to be joined with the endless perspectives of its ideological meaning ?...

What, in fact, is the element which unites the material presence of the work with its meaning ?

We submit that *social evaluation* is the element. [5]

## A Model for the Social Evaluation of Art

Four stages are proposed in a model for the production and evaluation of art within a social context

1. *Discourse* is defined here as the realm of socially constructed knowledge in which thinking and debate about artistic production takes place. Art discourse involves a wide range of social contexts: the discourse of art constructed through a populist newspaper seeking sensation, for example, will often adopt a negative manner towards contemporary art practice (*The Turner Prize* in Britain, is usually subject to such negativity), whereas arts discourse formed through critical journals may allow far more flexibility of opinion about the social functions of art to flourish.

It may be demonstrated that although such discourses afford varying attitudes towards art work, they share in common the semiotic principles upon which all discourse is based: those of selection from the range of registers and modalities through which opinion and debate may be expressed in a variety of media. For example within the discourse of classical sculpture, certain compositional choices to do with balance, harmony, and ‘the ideal’ may be foregrounded; whereas within the discourse of constructivism, choices to do with fixings, contrasts of scale, texture, and movement may feature.

2. *Conception*, its root the Latin verb *capere* ‘to take’, is defined as the stage of artistic engagement at which the artist is ‘taken with’ an initial idea or concept. Such concepts may be explored through a variety of media (from pencils to software packages) in diverse modes (doodling, sketching, modeling). Each of these modes connotes social meanings which may be analysed using semiotic principles common to them all. For example, the semiotic principles articulated through the process of selection from a range of choices to do with geometry systems, scale, format, weight and density of marks, and the analysis of the social connotations, or values, that each choice carries within a specific context.
3. *Inception*, from the same Latin root, may be understood as the stage at which a concept is ‘taken up’ in production: fully realised in material form or other technological media. The multimodal possibilities of material expression may be analysed through semiotic principles applicable to all media. In sculpture, for example, the system of choices

concerning the textural qualities of the work, (a *system of choices* articulates a full range of possibilities available for selection), systems of choices to do with scale, weight, density, balance, symmetry, stability of materials. All materials and combinations of selections from the available systems have potential to carry connotations of style, social value, and in the case of static sculpture, connotations of speed and movement.

4. *Reception*. This term represents the stage at which the artwork is ‘taken in’, or received within the public domain. The complexities of media (the means of expression) and modes (the manners and expression) may range from the properties of the display environment and the manner in which its *ambience* is manipulated, to the manner in which the work is publicised and reviewed. Here too, it is argued, there is the possibility of a common means of analysis based upon the recognition that selections have been made from systems of choices.

## Case Studies

Two pieces by Western Australian artists were discussed in the conference presentation:

*T. L. Robertson* by Ken Hannan (Fig. 1). A bronze bust set on a hardwood plinth against a background of marble in the foyer of the Library, Curtin University, W. A.

*Loco* by Lou Lambert (Fig. 2). A construction of wood and iron, set in natural landscape on the Curtin University campus.

It was demonstrated in discussion that the contrasting modalities of the two pieces were compatible within a discourse of sculpture encompassing the oppositions which define Classicism and Modernism:

### T. L. Robertson

sculptured  
indoors  
cultural context  
static  
balanced  
symmetrical  
Classical

### Loco

constructed  
outdoors  
natural context  
dynamic  
unbalanced  
asymmetrical  
Modernist

The three modalities of material combination, dress and pose in the *T.L. Robertson* bust all operate simultaneously to uphold the historical values of Classicism (bronze, hardwood and marble), the social values of conservation and formalism (collar, tie, waistcoat and jacket) and intellectual achievement (the head, excluding hands or full figure, and the prominence of the academic gown.) In contrast, the construction adopted for *Loco*, with its large, heavy, rough elements of wood and iron arranged asymmetrically, often interpenetrating each other, and visually off-balance from every angle of view illustrates how effectively the modalities of scale, weight, surface treatment, and composition may all operate simultaneously to visualise powerful dynamic forces out of control (‘loco’.)

Such multi-modality at work within the two pieces is extended when the works are received in their contexts of display: The bust, located in the foyer of Curtin University's Library, is an ever-present reminder of the quiet control of the intellect, the rational, the process of learning smoothly elided between one generation and the next by means of the written word. Outside, not far away on the same campus, *Loco* clangs, stamps and charges: industrial, dangerous and loud in a glade of unspoilt nature...



Fig.1



Fig.2

## References

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