Indeterminacy in Language and Art

By

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Abstract

Indeterminacy, triangulation, and translation are often contributing factors to the experience and understanding of a work of art in which meaning can be multi-layered, shifting or malleable. In this thesis, I explore these concepts, both in relation to my art practice and within a historical and cultural context. In essence, these theoretical discussions describe the instantiation of a philosophical idea in a visual art practice. In this way, the thesis can be generally understood as an exploration in the area of the philosophy of language, looking to its application as an impetus for creating visual art, and as an explanatory device for visual art.

There are three key philosophers whose ideas are instantiated in my art practice – W.V.O. Quine, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Donald Davidson. Quine offers the theory of radical translation, which is the translation from an unknown language to a known language, without aid or precedent. Wittgenstein offers the concept of indeterminacy of language, which asserts that multiple meanings for a singular item may be correct. Davidson offers the theory of triangulation, in which a combination of the beliefs and intentions of the artist and of the viewer, each triangulate with the work of art, to make meaning.

I discuss three artists whose work has been an inspiration – Joseph Kosuth, Sarah Lucas, and Ann Hamilton. The way these artists use language, humour, and code relates to indeterminacy, reception, and obfuscation. The goal of this essay is to explore the relations between art and philosophy, as a means to develop critical reflection on the methodologies underpinning my own art practice.
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Sine quibus non.
I Introduction

My thesis addresses indeterminacy in language and art. Although the theory of indeterminacy is originally about language, I apply this theory to art. This thesis concentrates on three aspects of indeterminacy – translation, obfuscation, and interpretation – and several related philosophical concepts. Each aspect is devoted a chapter in this text, and is used as a way to examine relevant art and artists. I proceed to conclude with a discussion of my visual art thesis work as it relates to the methodological principles of indeterminacy, obfuscation, and interpretation.

The theory of indeterminacy asserts that there is no such thing as a single correct meaning or translation for a sentence, in any language, by any speaker (Quine, 1960.) This lack of determined meaning is not about ambiguity, or a failure of language or translation, but rather a celebration of the richness of multiple meanings and nuanced use and interpretation of language.

There have been many attempts to connect both art and language and art and literature (Davidson, 2007) in ways similar to what I am proposing. However, this connection between art and language is different. It is not an attempt to define art; it is an attempt to treat the practice of art with the nuance and specificity of analytic philosophy, which is not a common connection. Broadly stated, when it comes to interpreting a work of art, there is no one right answer; there could be multiple wrong answers, but there are certainly multiple right answers also.

I should acknowledge at this point that the prospect of discussing language and art would appear to necessarily call for comment on the discourse of semiotics. While the field of semiotics includes countless fundamental interrelations with discourse on art, I have chosen to pursue a line of inquiry that skirts semiotics entirely. My rationale for this decision is to try to invigorate my practice and discourse analysis with a less familiar influence, namely – analytic philosophy. In particular the philosophy of language has a reciprocal engagement in my art practice. While these theories will fuel my art works, the direction of further research is often shifted and narrowed by lessons learned after making a piece. This branch of philosophy and analytical way of thinking is deeply ingrained in my practice. I recognize that semiotics would undoubtedly be a fruitful area for research, nevertheless I am drawn to the potential for the theory of indeterminacy as an influence in the discussion of visual arts practices.
II    Indeterminacy

In this chapter, I will be discussing, analyzing, and employing the work of recent philosophers of language. I will show that their work is relevant to and useful for visual artists and their practices. I will also examine the work of artists whose practices have made use of philosophical ideas and concepts from the philosophy of language. Both artists and philosophers contribute in this way when it comes to our understanding of how to interpret, evaluate and perceive works of art. Both the artists and philosophers to whom I refer will provide the historical context and background for my own work and practice.

I am aware that, in an art school, my use of analytic philosophers of language is unusual. The artistic community is much more familiar with the Continental philosophy of Baudrillard, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Guattari, than they are with Quine, Davidson, and Wittgenstein. In particular, it may seem surprising that I am not looking to the alternate perspective of Derrida on language and art. However, the discussion of visual art and analytic philosophy is an unusual pairing of seemingly disparate things, and I am interested in this unusual pairing and exploiting it for its common threads and possible new connections. I am focusing my research specifically within analytic philosophy and the philosophy of language. I will show that what I am interested in and what is relevant here are those concepts of philosophy of language regarding indeterminacy and layers of meaning, which strongly relate to my artistic practice and analytical nature. There is a reciprocity with the theory and practice in my praxis. The theory fuels the work, but the work also shapes the course of the research.

i.    Radical Translation

My first topics are radical translation; indeterminacy of translation; and the work of W.V.O. Quine. Radical translation is defined as the practice of translating an unknown language without the benefit of a translation manual, dictionary, or previous knowledge of any kind (Quine, 1960.) Quine’s thesis states there are many (perhaps an infinite number of) non-equivalent ways of translating the unknown language into a known language. This Indeterminacy of translation stretches and applies to all translations, even translations from known languages. The claim is that there are no exact and unique translations; there are multiple non-equivalent translations, such as when someone is translating an unknown language from scratch (Quine, 1960.)
There are some visual examples that illustrate and allow me to elaborate on the concept of radical translation: Stonehenge is one: it is a visualization of radical translation. Because it was created as a product of an unknown culture without written history, it is without a written explanation of purpose or intent. Therefore, Stonehenge will always remain indeterminate and thus open to many, non-equivalent, not incorrect translations. Stonehenge has been interpreted as a religious monument or a memorial for the dead; some say it is a part of a pagan religion and others believe Stonehenge to be an elaborate calendar and astronomical tool (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2011a.)

A second example is the first discovery of Egyptian hieroglyphics, which yielded no interpretation or translation, until the later discovery of the Rosetta Stone, which was a radical translation of hieroglyphics into Ancient Greek, an already known language (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2011b.)

I think it is possible to examine and interpret examples of modern and contemporary art through the lens of radical translation. I believe that interpretations of the works of Ann Hamilton and Sarah Lucas benefit when their work is examined and the methodology or receipt of their work as a radical translation, as well as indeterminacy and multiple interpretations are applied. I use this as an interpretive tool; neither of these artists has identified radical translation and indeterminacy as their methodology or their interest. I will discuss radical translation within my own work, as a both methodology and as an interpretive tool.

I do not claim that my use of radical translation and indeterminacy as a methodology in my own work is equivalent to a methodology of other artists. I am providing a potential interpretive or explanatory tool that enriches the perception and experience of the work of other artists. I do not wish to make the claim that any artist, other than me, uses indeterminacy as a theoretical base for artistic pieces of work. However, I do claim that indeterminacy is a product of the process of interpretation of the work of the artists discussed.

ii. Family Resemblance

The second philosopher in my research is Ludwig Wittgenstein. With Wittgenstein, the areas of language, indeterminacy, and art merge within his theories and his own artistic practice. It was recently discovered that Wittgenstein, in addition to producing revolutionary concepts in
philosophy, also had his own photography practice, so I will discuss his instantiation of his own philosophical idea. (Cambridge University Archives, 2011.) The instantiation of a philosophical idea within an art practice is a core strategy in my work.

Wittgenstein, when writing about the indeterminacy of language, came up with an idea he called family resemblance. While it would be familiar to talk about family resemblance in terms of shared, hereditary visual traits like eye colour, height, or another striking physical feature, Wittgenstein borrowed the term “family resemblance” from linguists. In linguistics, Romance languages – French, Spanish, Italian, Romanian, and Portuguese - are said to partake of a family resemblance. They all stem from a common source or origin, Latin, and share many traits, such as vocabulary, structure, and derivations. Wittgenstein borrowed the term “family resemblance” to explain how in language many terms cannot be strictly defined. Their usage and context, however, show that although a word may be used in many different ways, there is a family resemblance connecting those different ways. For example, there is no strict definition of “true” or “false” but there is a family resemblance of shared characteristics in the way we talk of “true friends”, “true north”, “a true wheel” and “true propositions”. Similarly, labeling something a game gives no concise definition; Scrabble and football are not the same, but there is a family resemblance in the way we use ‘game’ to talk of card games, board games, video games, and sports (Wittgenstein, 1973.)

In Wittgenstein’s use, his reliance on family resemblance stems from the closeness of a group of family portraits you might find in a stately home where ancestors and descendants are grouped in a gallery of family portraits. No one looks exactly like anyone else, but they share a definite, though indefinable set of common characteristics, which sets them apart from other families. Wittgenstein said that this is like a rope, made up of so many fibres, no single fibre runs the length of the rope – they are all overlapping to create the strength of the rope. (Wittgenstein, 1973, § 67.)

Wittgenstein exercised the concept of family resemblance in his construction of family photos. These were only discovered in the Cambridge University archives in 2011 and subsequently exhibited; they were thought to have been produced in the late 1930s and then lost or hidden during the Second World War (Syed, 2011.) What he did with his photography was in some ways a very early version of compositing, which is now done in Adobe PhotoShop and through other digital means. Wittgenstein used negatives of photos of himself and his three sisters, and sandwiched them to create a single image: a single portrait. This created an image
of a new and non-existent family member who is figured by the shared traits and characteristics of all the siblings. His photo is indeterminate in meaning and interpretation. There is no such family member.

The viewer of the constructed photo, knowing some of Wittgenstein’s theory, might interpret the photo as only showing one or two similarities, or see this as a typical Wittgenstein appearance. But as Wittgenstein said, there are an infinite number of descriptions of things the supposed portrait could show. They could range from the family’s wealth, its nationality, culture, religion, or typical size and height. Wittgenstein was trying to instantiate, or make concrete, his own theory of family resemblance, as he applied it to language. The layering of faces highlights the similarities, even if they are indefinable. Wittgenstein asserted that what was visible in this photograph was a range of probabilities, which differed from a normal photograph, which depicted a single probability (Cambridge University Archives, 2011.) So the difference between Wittgenstein’s photograph of his composites portrait and a typical portrait is the difference between a word with an easy, clear definition, and a word which requires other related words to be defined properly. Also, if a viewer has no information about Wittgenstein or how he created this photograph, the latter will function with only the visible information – a vague appearance and a subject that is hard to determine. There is also a blurry, fuzzy, and creepy quality to it. As will become clear, this instantiation is also practiced in my own work.

iii. Explication de texte

In this section, I relate these same philosophical concepts to my own artistic practice, and to the practices of Sarah Lucas, Ann Hamilton, and Joseph Kosuth. A biographical note is in order. While pursuing my undergraduate degree of Visual Art and French Literature, I became fascinated by and adept at the French literary tradition of explication de texte (University of Bristol, 2011.) This practice takes a written text, which can be either known, or previously unseen, and seeks to explain all parts of it as fully as possible. It does this by trying to situate the text, its context, and identifying the work if possible. Stylistic tropes are important to discuss as well, like Proust’s alliteration and Zola’s third person indirect style of writing (Arnold, 2005.) The explication talks about the ideas in the text, the language of the text; it explains all metaphors, figures of speech, all references to other works of literature, art and historical events. It also interprets the text and is often a very lengthy and in-depth explanation of a short piece of text. The explication de texte is an obsessive practice that attempts to exhaust all
possibilities within one piece of text. It is a peculiarly French invention, which differs from the English literature tradition of close reading. And, as my interests do not only lie within literature, as primary focus is the practice of visual arts, I came to see the connection to the art world.

The practice of finding every possible art and historical reference within a work is common amongst curators and art critics. The references suggested by the use of certain materials are frequently mentioned within critiques. The subject matter and the place of one work within a body of work, as well as surrounding intellectual history, all contribute to an artistic version of the explication de texte. When looking so closely and exhaustively at a work of art, the multitude of interpretations and the many layers of meaning emerge. For the general public, who may not be looking so closely at a work of art, or may not be aware of the many references it contains, there must be a more immediate entry point from which to jump off to many more complicated references and meanings. One such example is the work of Sarah Lucas.

Sarah Lucas was born in North London, Holloway in 1962. She went to Goldsmiths during its boom of producing the Young British Artists, including Damian Hirst and Angus Fairhurst, and graduated in 1987. I do not share all of Lucas’ systems and values. I do, however, work within some of the same systems, and share some of the same values. Her incredibly varied body of work is brought together through the consistent threads of these systems and values, and how they are constantly explored in her work.

Subversion is a structure Lucas consistently works within, eliciting a strong reaction. Lucas uses language frequently – in her titles and in her visual puns. For her, language is a tool for communication and also for subversion (Muir and Wallace, 2004.) The subjects Lucas subverts in her work – sex, death, depression – all lead to the subversion of religion itself in the work. Lucas frequently deals with gender ideas, and presents gender concepts and roles using bawdy humour and visual puns on crass language. She has referred to this as the Theory of “rude” – subverting all that is embarrassing or against religious ideals (Collings, 2002.) Lucas took religion classes at Goldsmiths, as she “wanted to stir things up in the classes” (Lucas and Coles, 2004.) Her knowledge and irreverence towards religion is evident, as it shows up in the work, the titles, and the imagery.

Lucas’ predilection for working with the mass-produced and manmade materials becomes like a signature, or a signature turn of phrase, like Zola’s third person indirect style. Lucas employs dark humour in all her works. Often, the entry into a piece by Sarah Lucas is the
visual pun, the joke, or the pop culture reference, and then the other layers present themselves. Lucas is fascinated by Englishness, calling upon England’s past, and debunking classical work in favour of pop culture (Lucas and Coles, 2004.)

Lucas’ 2003 piece “Christ You Know It Ain’t Easy”, is an archetypal Christ on the cross, constructed from Marlboro Red cigarettes and placed upon St. George’s Cross, the English national flag. This work was exhibited at the Tate Britain show “In a Gadda Da Vida” with Hirst and Fairhurst, in the Spring of 2004 (Muir and Wallace, 2004.) The title of this work comes from the 1969 Beatles song “The Ballad of John and Yoko.” This song was very personal and self-deprecating, and used dark humour to relate to fame and the media, as well as backlash. The song was considered subversive and controversial, and was banned from multiple radio stations, due to the use of the word “crucify” (Harry, 2000.) Lucas has said that her titles help her to remember how she came up with a piece or an idea. She has said that titles help you identify a piece, but they do not explain it. There are many different ideas in her head while she is working. This piece was made while she was trying to quit smoking, a long-term struggle (Muir and Wallace, 2004; Lucas and Coles, 2004.)

For Lucas, smoking relates heavily to the pub culture of England, working class values, and nostalgia for the past in England. St. George's cross on the flag of England is a red cross on a white background, and is surpassed in global popular culture by the British Union Jack. St. George’s cross appears in popular working class artifacts like the Daily Mail newspaper and English football team jerseys. Crucifixes appear on churches, religious homes and religious schools, and widely within historical religious art works. In working class England, the modern church is the pub, which you go to on Sunday instead. Her piece “Christ You Know it Ain’t Easy” is black humour. The cigarettes tell you of time spent doing ordinary and empty things. The piece is a poke at English class systems, and the working class pastimes, and English identity seen like a religion. In an interview on the Tate site, an audience member remarks to Sarah Lucas in reference to her stake in the work she makes and its personal nature: “I noticed your work is all very personal.” To this she responded: “Is there is anything else?” (Lucas and Coles, 2004.)

Lucas wants to debunk classical art. Rubens’ classical “Christ on the Cross”, and other old religious works did not resonate with her. Instead, they left her “cold and shivering” and made no sense to her. These symbols of suffering, religion, and redemption were not for her (Muir and Wallace, 2004; Ferguson, 1966.)
Her beliefs, background, and intentions triangulate to create meanings in her work. Viewers can get some of these references and intention in varying degrees, and it all creates an indeterminacy of interpretation. There are so many layers that a multitude of meanings and interpretation is possible and correct. This indeterminacy is appealing to me. The multitude of interpretations and entry points, based on both language and visual, is what I like in Sarah Lucas’ work and what I desire my own work.

In this chapter, I have discussed three philosophical concepts, in relation to the practice of Sarah Lucas. This artist deliberately engages with multiple meanings in her work and creates indeterminacy. The conclusion to be drawn from Lucas’ work, and which I hope to position in support of my own, is that there is no singularly correct translation or meaning in language, nor in art.
III Obfuscation

i. Code

This chapter deals with codes as they are employed in contemporary art. Codes are used in a unique way in art, which is unlike the traditional military use, but their use still derives from codes as translation vehicles. So art, language, and translation will intersect with code in this work. I build on the ordinary use and meaning of ‘code’, “a: a system of signals or symbols for communication; b: a system of symbols (as letters or numbers) used to represent assigned and often secret meanings” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2011.) Other glossaries define code as “in communications, an unvarying rule for replacing a piece of information” (e.g. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2011.)

My work with codes, systems of codes, and the visualization of codes is intrinsically linked to my interest in language, systems of language, and the visualization of language. While language as a field of study is no doubt a rich subject matter from which much information and depth can be gleaned, the act of translation from a verbal into a visual language not only illuminates the ‘original meaning’, but also creates a loss. This is a loss of meaning, information, and intention. I am interested in this loss, and the attempts to capitalize on it. As Donald Davidson has pointed out, “A picture is not worth a thousand words, or any other number. Words are the wrong currency” (Davidson, 2001a, p. 263.) They are different systems and do not directly translate.

While there are many codes – linguistic, mathematical, logical, and visual – visual codes are particular in that they belong to iconography, and have arisen from a symbolism to become recognizable, widespread and concrete. Unlike visual codes, verbal and written codes have often been the subject of the study of language, and analytic philosophy. For example, W.V.O. Quine, for whom a particular system of code that outputs further code is named, thought that acquiring a first language was like trying to decode a totally unknown native language with no linguistic help or guide (Hofstadter, 1999 and Quine, 1960.) Quine also thought that symbolic logic, the use of “p”, “q” and “r” to represent parts of complex sentences in an argument, was itself a code for ordinary language (Quine, 1960.)

Davidson, who was trained by Quine, argues that there can be a private language, used and understood by only one individual. Any expression of that private language must be
regarded as a code, uttered by only one person, but potentially translatable and understood by others. This appears to me to be a parallel situation to the way in which the general public experiences, comments on and critiques contemporary art. Art historians and critics search for translation and have asserted that the public does not have the key to crack the code, which only the inner circle possesses. While research scientists search for the cause of a disease, art researchers might search for the code keys. No one questions that there are causes of disease, nor codes of interpretation. This parallels another of Davidson’s views on language, namely that we must distinguish between that which language users try to assert, and what they try to convey through language (Davidson, 2001a.) This is most applicable to visual arts practices, in which many must choose how much information is either present in the work, or a didactic panel accompanying the work, and how much can left to viewer for interpretation. In my own work, I am more interested in conveying than asserting. The conversation that begins between the viewer, the work, and me is mediated by a title. However, I am not interested in prescribing the viewer’s entire experience. I aim to exploit this distinction between asserting and conveying.

The philosopher who wrote most cogently about codes was Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was often accused of writing in an arcane, coded way himself. In his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein asserted that “Everything that you know and need to know can be said in three words” (Wittgenstein, 1923.) Mysteriously enough, he did not enlighten his reader as to what those three words might be. He claimed that anything, which represented something else, was in some sense, a code. Hieroglyphics, written musical notes and scores, military codes, scripts, propositions, were all codes. They all depicted or represented something else. As Wittgenstein put it:

A gramophone record, the musical idea, the written notes, the sound waves, all stand to one another in the same internal relation of depicting that holds between language and the world. They are all constructed according to a common logical pattern (Wittgenstein, 1923, 4.014.)

In addition to this characterization of codes, Wittgenstein also explained the mechanism by which a code operates.

There is a general rule by means of which the musician can obtain the symphony from the score, and which makes it possible to derive the symphony from the grooves on the gramophone record. That is what constitutes the inner similarity between these things which seem to be constructed in such entirely different ways (Wittgenstein, 1923, 4.0141.)
Wittgenstein elaborates upon and gives an in-depth analysis to the concept of a code according to the dictionaries and glossaries, namely that codes are systems of signs for converting one form of representation into another by means of a projection rule (Wittgenstein, 1923.)

In this very general notion of a code, all kinds of things count as codes. Lights, clicks, dots and dashes, images, may all be used to represent something else. The NATO phonetic alphabet uses names for letters, to ensure that a telephone message is correctly received. A is Alpha, b is Bravo, c is Charlie, and so on (Surhone et al., 2010.) In semaphore, flag positions are used in place of letters and words, to ensure a message is received (Araujo and Boginski, 2006.) Morse code is a system of dots and dashes, long and short signals, adopted for ease of delivery, representing letters and numbers. (Caron, 1996) The Navaho military spy code used transcribed Navaho sounds to represent English letters, and Navaho words to represent English words, and mixed the two Navaho forms to translate messages that could not be decoded (Aaseng, 1992.) This was a very secret code, far removed from the public codes ordinarily relied on, info graphics such as traffic light colours, international fabric washing symbols, danger or poison symbols, and barber poles.

The main thrust of this chapter is that codes and symbols act as cornerstones of contemporary art and provide a solid connection between art and language. For example, the art group Art and Language, founded in the U.K. in the late 1960s, was responsible for many of the innovations concerning language and art, coining the term ‘conceptual art’, elaborating on the connections between art, theory, language and codes. One of the best-known members of this group, Charles Harrison, published a book where the paperback cover illustrations are all codes and formulae (Harrison, 2001.)

In contrast to this modern use of codes, Medieval and Renaissance art uses more direct and standardized symbolism that was necessary for the delivery of religious tenets when most of the population was illiterate. A blue halo is represents a member of the holy trinity, while a white halo is represents saints or Mary, an owl represents wisdom, etc. (Smyth, 1993.) The pregnant-looking bride is not to be seen as pregnant, but as pure and fertile. The study of these symbolic representations is iconography (Ferguson, 1966.)
ii. Miscommunication and Misdirection

There is a practice within contemporary art, which looks not to iconography, but to the codes themselves as a medium, conduit, or subject matter. What follows are several examples of contemporary artists within this new tradition. In 2004, Welsh artist Cerith Wyn Evans began to make a series of chandeliers, which transmitted a variety of texts by blinking in Morse code. “Rabbit’s Moon” (2004) transmitted a definition of the word “image”, quoted from a text by the Welsh leftist political theorist and Marxist critic of the arts, Raymond Williams (Carlock, 2005.)

Further iterations of Wyn Evans’ chandelier utilizing Morse code included a variety of texts transmitted, including works by William Blake and the Marquis de Sade. In these works, the chandelier is purely aesthetic and not necessarily to Wyn Evans’ aesthetic preference. The crux of the work is the obscuring of the text via the use of code. This piece offers multiple entry points: the viewer can visually admire the chandelier, or the viewer can experience the blinking lights and their representation of a cityscape. The viewer can also appreciate the passage of time from the positive and negative spaces of the light blinks, and might even consider the fact that a coded message is being transmitted. As the message is delivered in code, however, it does not aim to be understood directly and by all, but rather only by the artist, and perhaps critics or those who are experts of that code (Carlock, 2005.)

The artist transmits the definition of the word “image” through means that cannot transmit images themselves. An image is replaced by the word “image”, which is replaced by its definition. The definition is transferred to Morse code, which is transmitted by light. In what is left after translating, the negative space is as important as the positively communicated message. The loss, or failure, becomes a successful subject, as what is missing presents itself. Wyn Evans uses language as a stand-in for the visual, and then obscures the language beyond immediate recognition by displaying it visually. This visualization of language removes its original meaning through the act of translation. In Wyn Evans’ own words, “I hate the idea of being accessible” (Carlock, 2005.)

American artist Ann Hamilton’s piece “myein” at the 1999 Venice Biennale involved at least two types of code. The pavilion walls featured a relief of poetry on the subject of suffering, spelled out in Braille. The Braille relief was given no inherent colour differentiation from the wall. This tactile code could only be seen when powdered red pigment was dispersed from the top of the pavilion, falling down the walls of the interior to the floor. This recalls the use of written messages required another element to be readable, such as lemon juice requiring a light
source, or invisible ink pens which require another type of ink over top. Hamilton took a code for the visually impaired, and turned it into a striking visual image. By enlarging Braille to an extreme, and presenting it as a visual, the total reference to be made from the installation was neither available to the blind, nor the seeing. The tension between what was visually available and what was conceptually available is deliberate.

Another code used in “myeĩn” (1999) was the NATO phonetic alphabet, which Hamilton employed to read aloud Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address. This phonetic alphabet is used to ensure that the correct letters are transcribed for important messages or reference codes. While an observer of this work could have potentially transcribed the entire Lincoln address letter by letter, the use of an auditory code rendered the historical address nonsensical.

What is interesting here is that Hamilton conveyed information without the use of the expected avenues to do so; she wanted to engage other senses and systems, rather than present an accessible reading (Coffey, 2001.) While it is not my particular focus, it is relevant that Hamilton’s work is often politically motivated. Her use of codes is directly related to an expression of political histories and ideologies. The codes both state and obscure these tenets, and the work cannot be reduced to mere political cliché. Again, here there are multiple entry points, some provided by the use of codes. The work presented was visually striking and compelling to experience directly. Upon closer inspection, however, it was revealed that codes were in use, and a key would be required to fully understand the information being presented.

My final example is Canadian artist Joyce Wieland’s 1971 lithograph “O Canada”. In this, she translates the Canadian National Anthem into lipstick prints on paper. The artist made a mouth print for every phonetic syllable in the anthem. The translation from the words of the song to the mouth positions for groupings of vowels and consonants represents an encoding. The encoding employed is not a recognized system and requires a key for anyone apart from the artist, to decode. Through the use of the code and the visual impact it makes, Wieland conveys patriotism, musicality, feminism and eroticism. Her use of the image of lips speaks to lip reading, as well as eroticism and patriotism in both the shape and colour choice (Rabinovitz, 1981.)

These three artists have employed different kinds of code for myriad purposes. What they do share is an interest in adding another layer of meaning through the translation of language and content through the use of a code. They benefit from the use of the code; as it becomes an artistic medium and as a trope. These artists have taken strong or celebrated pieces of language and text and disguised them. This disguising has taken the power away from
their original linguistic intent. The importance of these texts, however, is heightened by the need to encode them. The artists’ use of code amplifies the relationship between communication and miscommunication.

There are at least three reasons why the study of codes as related to and used in art is worthwhile. One is that codes form part of the meaning of the work of art as a hidden ingredient, which contributes to the identity of the work of art. The experience of the viewer or audience relies most heavily on that code, and what is encoded may vary. While the code is presented as one of the more important aspects of the work, the encoded subject matter is of the utmost importance to the artist. While the encoded material or medium may be arbitrary for the viewer, it never is for the artist.

iv. Decoding

Lastly, there are several intersecting entry points to works of art which act as gateways for the viewer to access the work. Once employed, these tactics draw the viewers into the personalized space of the work, where they can enter a dialogue with what is represented and the underlying critical discourses. These critical discourses are often depicting or connecting the viewer to certain presented values. In addition, these values often expose a specific autobiographical context to the artworks. The meaning of a work of art is multi-layered and it provides different points of entry and accessibility. Often, only a certain amount of the discourse surrounding a work will be readily accessible. The total context of the work of art may only be available to an elite, initiated group, or to no one at all. So, Wittgenstein’s remarks about perception are pertinent: “the aspects of things that are most important for us may be hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. One is unable to notice something because it is always before one’s eyes” (Wittgenstein, 1973, § 125.)

Can you teach the code in a work of art which is employing the code? This has been an important question for me, when working with code and obfuscation. The work of brothers Jake and Dinos Chapman would seem to positively answer this question. Their solo collaborative shows have allowed the viewer to acclimate to the imagery and themes in the work before drawing conclusions based on a greater number of works. In this way, looking at the works of the Chapman brothers teaches you how to look at their work, and in turn, how to interpret it. This breaking into a work of coded art involves a balance between accessibility, and depth,
generosity and obscurity. Davidson's theory of triangulation (Davidson, 2001b), which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter, provides a possible solution for balance. The theory of triangulation is a theory about interpretation and communication. This theory applies directly to codes, hidden messages, symbol systems, and contextual analysis. In order to decode any of these, you need three things – what the artist is depicting or representing, your interpretation or understanding of what is being depicted or represented, and a way of connecting these two, by connecting your beliefs and intentions with those of the artist (Davidson, 2001b.) What is so useful about Davidson’s theory of triangulation is that he says you cannot get one perspective or one entry point without the others; you need to get them all together to get any interpretation or decoding. Davidson’s theory of triangulation would seem to answer the coded question: whichever entry point a viewer uses to access a work, he/she will be able to glean his/her own meaning for the work, as long as he/she is contextualizing it with his/her own beliefs and the perceived intentions of the artist (Davidson, 2001b.) This theory retains indeterminacy and asserts that there will not be one correct interpretation. What follows from this theory is that in the absence of these three references, there is no entry point or acquiring of meaning in a work of art.

The arcane and archaic nature of obsolete military codes is appealing to me for its nostalgia, and necessity for a depth of research and work. They are easily accessed as an idea in pop-culture or history, but require further thought and investigation for insight. The use of code can undergo a loss of original meaning, but can be reinvested with a new emphasis and meaning. Codes can be aggrandizing and imbue perceived importance and secrecy in that which is deemed necessary to encode. What is hidden becomes highlighted. The tension arising from code, language, and the potential losses and shifts in meaning presented, infuses my artwork.
IV Interpretation

This chapter examines the theory of interpretation and the theory of reception. Triangulation focuses on the interpretation of one single viewer, taking into account his/her life experience. The theory of triangulation uses the perceived intents and beliefs of the artist, the intents and the beliefs of the viewer, and the work itself, to create meaning. This meaning and interpretation is created by a singular audience. This is in contrast to reception theory, which looks to the wider reception of a work of art by its many viewers.

i. Theory of Triangulation

Although the artistic and linguistic realms are disparate, Donald Davidson tries to bridge the gap between fields of study with his theory of radical and multiple interpretation and triangulation. Davidson broadens Quine’s theory of translation, so that it includes anything subject to interpretation, including speech, written language, literary works, artistic works, and music. In Davidson’s view, all interpretations of these are subject to the same indeterminacy that Quine first described. Also, any interpretation or explanation of any of these has to triangulate between the creator’s intentions, beliefs and background, the work itself, and the beliefs and background of the perceiver, audience, listener, or reader (Davidson, 2001a, and 2001b.)

This triangulation is always indeterminate, approximate, and in flux. The notion of triangulation borrows from land surveying triangulation, astronomy, and global positioning, but exists without the mathematical certainty and precision that these provide. This is Davidson’s theory of multiple interpretations. Applied to works of art, we see that there may be many divergent, non-equivalent, yet not incorrect interpretations of a work of art. There may be many layers of meaning, not all of which will be revealed by a single triangulation at any given time.

ii. Reception Theory

In reception theory, the reach of interpretation is broader. How a piece of work is received should take into account multiple audience members or viewers, coming from varied backgrounds (Hall, 1973.) Reception theory is often associated with media theorist Stuart Hall.
The term was originally coined for use in literature but has been extended to visual arts and media. Reception theory is about the meaning of a work of art and the projections from the audience to, in part, create that meaning. These projections are informed by the cultural backgrounds, knowledge, and life experiences of these audience members. The trends collected from these projections and ensuing interpretations create an overall reception of a work of art (Hall et al, 2001.) Reception theory adds a larger dimension to Davidson’s theory of triangulation by introducing the public.

The theme of reception theory, in addition to indeterminacy, coding, obfuscation, triangulation, is highlighted in the work of Xu Bing, a Chinese artist engaging with, and playing with, both written and visual forms of language. In his “Book from the Sky” Xu created a work deliberately designed to be open to multiple interpretations. Xu spent three years creating four thousand made-up Chinese symbols for non-existent words. He hand-carved each symbol in a realistic way, and then used them to typeset books, traditional scrolls and panels. The result was a room with many disparate surfaces covered in fake Chinese symbols. Everything looked genuine, historical and accurate, but it was all a hoax. The writings were impossible to read, unintelligible as written offerings, but appeared visually authentic. For example, he invented a calligraphic symbol for a tree, which actually resembles a tree; but in Chinese, the symbol does not say “tree.”

Some viewers of the work exhibited in the China Art Gallery in Beijing in 1998 believed the created characters to be real, and believed themselves too ignorant of ancient Chinese script to properly read them. Their interpretation of the work was as an attack on the viewers who were fooled by the created symbols. Interestingly, Xu accepted this alternate view of his work as a viable interpretation. The hoax theme should have been apparent from the humorous title of the work, “Book from the Sky”, which is a Chinese idiom equivalent to our “It’s all Greek to me,” used when encountering some indecipherable writing (Erickson, 2011).

In a subsequent and on-going work, “Book from the Ground”, Xu attempts to create a universal language made up from infographics and pictograms largely culled from the safety cards found on international airlines. He also employs other sources of universal symbols, icons and infographics, such as washing care instructions. This language seems indecipherable, at first, as the sentences are just pictures; but the pictures are intended to allow for communication across all languages and cultures.
An early depiction of the work in “Book from the Ground” was featured in the show “Automatic Update” at the Museum of Modern Art in 2007. The work is still in progress, but the icons used have become a decipherable font, and are made available in a program or key, which will translate the icons into English and Chinese. Here we have many of the features of my own work – multiple meanings and entry points, humour, indeterminacy, varying reception, obfuscation, language used both as material and tool, and encoding.

Xu Bing’s own words acknowledge this analysis:

I believe that the significance of a work does not lie in its resemblance to Art, but in its ability to present a new way of looking at things. I have created many works that relate to language. This subject first took shape twenty years ago with a piece called “Book from the Sky”. It was called “Book from the Sky”, because it contained a text legible to no one on this earth (including myself). Today I have used this new “language of signs” to write a book that a speaker of any language can understand; I call it “Book From the Ground.” But in truth, these two texts share something in common: regardless of your mother tongue or level of education, they strive to treat you equally. “Book from the Sky” was an expression of my doubts regarding extant written languages. “Book from the Ground” is the expression of my quest for the ideal of a single script. Perhaps the idea behind this project is too ambitious, but its significance rests in making the attempt (Xu Bing, 2001.)

iii. Humour

Finding the humour in a work of art is a feat of triangulation. When many more can find the humour, it is a feat of reception. Humour often provides a primary entry point into a work of art.

In his Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein drew a picture of a “duck-rabbit”. The figure could be ‘seen’ as the head of a rabbit, if one saw the elongated part as ears, or the head of a duck, if one saw the elongated part as a bill. Wittgenstein was using a visual pun to introduce his views on ‘seeing something as something’, the act of perceiving. He posited this as the correct theory on perspective and visual points of view. His deeper point was that everything seen can, depending upon the perspective of the perceiver, be interpreted in different ways. A second possible and significant reference point to his work is pop culture. Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit is borrowed from the culture of his time, taken from Jastrow’s Fact and Fable in Psychology. Wittgenstein’s theories on perception were presented after gaining the attention of his audience, using a playful visual entry point (Wittgenstein, 1973.)
A second example, one of subversive humour, is when Joseph Kosuth curated "Play of the Unsayable. Ludwig Wittgenstein" at the Secession Gallery in Vienna in 1989. For this exhibition, Kosuth selected over a hundred painters who claimed to have at some point been influenced by Wittgenstein, and displayed their works in the gallery above text quotations of Wittgenstein. The paintings were not hung in a stereotypical orderly manner, and they were not given individual priority. One way of interpreting this show is an expression of subversion, giving the paintings low-priority, and propping them up with quotes from a philosopher of language (Kuspit.)

The work of David Shrigley also fits into this lineage of dark humour, as he depicts his bizarre and funny drawings exposing his hilarious and twisted point of view. Shrigley’s style of drawing and handwritten text are both crude and resemble outsider art. The scribbled style indicates and reinforces the humour in the work. His work is distributed in accessible formats such as paperback books and postcards, but the work itself consists of raw and unrefined drawings and writing, in addition to sculptures and photographs. Shrigley’s sculpture “You, Your Wee Sister, Your Parents and the Social Services” is a work of art made of two ping pong balls, and two ping pong paddles with the words of the title written on them in Shrigley’s signature handwritten font. This piece is a paradigm of the repertoire of entry points discussed above. The impact of the work is immediate, but at the same time it is dark in its humour and critical of a government institution, which indicates the personal turmoil and experience behind the entry point of the joke. Shrigley’s drawing “Time to Choose” presents the viewer with three crude and unappealing choices: Good, Evil, and Don’t Know. The Good figure, with its pointed cloak and pointy spear, does not indeed look to be good. The Evil figure is a horned and hairy caricature of evil. The Don’t Know figure is indeterminate and appropriately named. It is also refreshing to be offered an option of “don’t know” which hints at Shrigley’s outsider take on morality (Shrigley, 2003.)

Both Kosuth and Shrigley work in a wide variety of media and styles even from within their own practices yet they share the common threads of humour, popular and familiar imagery and raw, unrefined styles that allow an immediate read of the work, and direct the impact. The work can be examined at length to expose the personal and autobiographical content and implied social critiques which humour allows. According to reception theory, the meaning of a work is not just a function of the artist or the work itself, but depends heavily upon the viewer or the public at large to make meaning. In that vein, humour will require an audience to truly be funny; the joke becomes a joke when more than one is in on it.
Humour can be found in my work in titles, in appearance, in pop culture references, and can act as an entry point, or to distract from more grave elements. My sensibilities lean towards irreverence, but generally lie in dark humour and gallows humour,
V An art practice of objects which elicit nervous laughter

In this chapter, the focus will be on my own practice. The three pieces of my own work I will focus on are: Wrong Flyer, Shivs/Shanks, and All my arguments are over semantics.

Wrong Flyer (figure 1.1, 1.2) is a half-sized scale model of the Wright Brothers’ Flyer Bi-Plane. It is a skeleton constructed of welded steel tubing and sits on an over-sized model airplane base. The wingspan is twenty feet and the structure is three feet high. The base was built in the style of miniature model bases, and likens the Wrong Flyer to an awkwardly gargantuan model airplane kit. The plane sits at eye level, atop its three-foot base. This is a plane that is not designed to fly. It is constructed from the wrong materials and contains none of the essentials for flight. The structure is open and literally open to interpretation. The history of flight is both a history of failure and tragedy as well as innovation and invention. This replica is more of an obfuscation than a true translation, as it calls to mind the original plane and then brings forth other references immediately, taking off from there. Its title, using the word wrong rather than the name Wright, is a nod to Magritte’s “Ceci n’est pas une pipe.” While it is a plane, in form and inspiration, it most certainly is not a functional one. It is more like falsified museum items – like replica dinosaur bones cast in plastic, replica ships for the purpose of display, or the animatronic shark replica on the JAWS ride at Universal Studios.
My work “Shivs/Shanks” (figure 2.1, 2.2) takes the game of “telephone” – a children’s game in which an utterance is transformed as it is whispered from person to person in a group – to a physical form. The one-note punch line of the possible prison weapon from the mundane object is returned to a frightening physical form – a series of thirteen toothbrushes shaped into prison-style weapons through fairly low-tech modes of production – belt sanders, hand-held files, blowtorches, and superglue. This tension between the amusement in language, and the fear or distaste in physicality is enhanced when displayed en masse and in clean and authoritative museum-like vitrines. The implements are made with the ease and efficiency of electric machinery, hand files and super glue, along with accessories like razor blades. These weapons may still be made of rudimentary and innocuous materials turned nocuous, but they are created with great variety and an attention to craftsmanship. These super shivs and shanks recall the scene in the 1986 film “Crocodile Dundee” when a knife is pulled out in an attempted robbery. Paul Hogan as Dundee, gives unexpected response to this threat is to pull out a much larger knife, with the comment: “You call that a knife? This is a knife.” I could have had this same moment, in comparing a rudimentary shank made by dragging a toothbrush against concrete, with my shanks, made in a technical workshop.
Figure 2.1 Shivs/Shanks

Figure 2.2 Shivs/Shanks
My most recent work includes a series of text pieces titled “All my arguments are over semantics.” (figure 3) In one version, this sentence is printed out in grey vinyl cut letters, and placed upon a three-foot-long print of scanned lined paper. In another version, the sentence is printed on twelve pieces of 12 inch lined paper, and then mimicked in my cursive writing on twelve pieces of blank lined paper. The sentence conveys both self-deprecating humour and a philosophical reference. This phrase takes ownership of a dismissal of most arguments – the opinion that discussing the semantics would discredit the whole argument. The phrase is self-deprecating also, in the sense that this thesis is about semantic arguments and places much importance upon them. The repetition of writing in the multiple versions implies either a school house exercise in practice, or punishment. This piece also references Wittgenstein’s book the Tractatus, in which he asserted that there are no real philosophical problems, only problems with language (Wittgenstein, 1923.)

Figure 3 All my arguments are over semantics.
The methodological principles derived from the previous chapters in this text underpin each of these works. The meanings of these works vary based on triangulation, reception, and humour. In all my work, I am interested in language, puns, humour, and in particular, dark humour. My recent public art work "deadbooth" (Figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.3) was a project that relied heavily on dark humour to create triangulation and reception. This public art piece was a custom photo booth I built to be housed in a shipping container during the 2011 ContainerArt exhibition at the PNE. I was on-site to manipulate the photos to make their subjects look dead. There is humour in the audience receiving a copy of their mimicked post-mortem photograph. The interior length of the shipping container was set up like an old-fashioned parlour and contained a rug, a gramophone case, and twenty imitation post-mortem photographs, printed large and with ornate faux frames. As to the reception, some guests to the container immediately knew what they were looking at, and were in on the joke, while others had to ask if the photos were real. In the contents of the container, in addition to the portraits, and my interactions with the public, there is a gallows humour and a black comedy in the interaction with dark subject matter.

Figure 4.1 deadbooth
Figure 4.2  deadbooth

Figure 4.3  deadbooth
This humour found in the macabre is echoed in “Shivs/Shanks” which takes references from prison violence and also the keen innovation and creativity demonstrated by prisoners. The humour found in looking at rudimentary weapons from mundane objects stops when the objects are found to be quite realistic. They are deadly. The number of weapons is a ‘baker’s dozen’ which can construed as making an extra in case one does not work, or getting one free, or the very unlucky number of 13. The precision with which the weapons were made is coupled with their pastel palette and lets the viewer know that the maker of these objects is clearly not a stereotypical prisoner.

In “Wrong Flyer”, triangulation is necessary to derive a meaning, as a direct one is not presented. There are a number of cultural and historical references that aid in the reception of this work. The history of flight is one of more error than trial, and there is a great sense of failure in this cultural artifact that was designed to defeat its own purpose. The bare skeleton of the work and the purposeful antiquing and rusting treatment recalls the historical relics of disasters. The work can resonate differently if the viewer is aware that the artist is female. The female welder of a large-scale object can conjure up contrast to the predominantly male field of employment of metal work, or the historical moment of many women welders of airplanes during the WW II effort. The airplane referenced by “Wrong Flyer” is obvious, but its intents and purposes are obfuscated. There are ulterior purposes that are hidden, namely the blurred line between success and failure, and the blurred line between literal and figurative loss.

Triangulation plays a role in the receipt of my newest work. The work “What We’ve Got Here is a Failure to Communicate” (Figures 5.1, 5.2, 5.3) has a number of pop culture and consumer culture references in addition to the overarching theme of failure and amateurism. The work is a series of fake forms of communication – laptops, books, and telephones, made of metal, wood, and plastic. These objects are obviously fabrications and conjure an inability to communicate or failed attempts at communication. The title is taken from a line of dialogue from the prison warden to Paul Newman as Luke in the 1967 film “Cool Hand Luke.” The welded laptop takes planned obsolescence to a hyperbolic proportion and the obsolescence is immediate rather than one to three years in the future. The wooden book refers to commercial products and services, such as the dummy books that line bookshelves to be sold, and to the books-by-the-foot buying service available for affluent people looking to fill their libraries, yet uninterested in reading (Strand.) Again, there is a reference to obsolescence, specifically the fear of the obsolescence of books, based on new technology. The cast telephone has myriad references to draw upon, such as the telephone game of miscommunication, the obsolescence
of an old style phone not recognized by young children today as a telephone at all, and the use of outdated language in reference to current telephone activities, like dialing and dial tone.

Figure 5.1 *What We’ve Got Here is a Failure to Communicate*
Figure 5.2 What We’ve Got Here is a Failure to Communicate

Figure 5.3 What We’ve Got Here is a Failure to Communicate
My next principle concerns levels of meaning, both candid and obscured. Obfuscation figures largely in many of my pieces. This is illustrated in my coded book “Proust” (Figures 6.1, 6.2.) This book contained a single sentence, which summarized succinctly the entire seven-volume novel *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust. This sentence was encoded using a rule-based system. All words over two letters in length were represented by found visuals from vintage encyclopedias; all words two letters or less in length had each letter represented by a found visual relating to the NATO Alphabet version of that letter. For example, the word “of” is represented by an image of an Oscar (Academy Award) statue and an image of the steps to the foxtrot. In this piece, methods of making communication more clear – phonetic alphabet, visualizations – are used to obscure and obfuscate a text. In using techniques of making the work of Proust more accessible, it becomes less accessible than ever.

Figure 6.1 Excerpt from *Proust* book – “of”

Figure 6.2 Except from *Proust* book – “in”

“Shivs/Shanks” is also a direct example of the obfuscation of the telephone game. The translation is from a joke or even a one-word punch line, into objects, which bring up other references and also look back to the original joke. The transformation of a toothbrush into a weapon parallels the trajectory of the first sentence uttered in the telephone game into the final warped sentence. While there is humour in this piece, the laughter it elicits is nervous laughter.

Obfuscation is at the forefront of the piece “*What We’ve Got Here is a Failure to Communicate.*” Tools of communication are used as visual symbols for communication itself and consumerism and imply a social critique. The objects presented are not real, and could not be used to communicate anything in a traditional sense. The hoax is an obfuscation, which allows for a layered interpretation.
My final methodological principle is indeterminacy itself, which asserts that there is no such thing as a unique meaning or translation. The phrase “All my arguments are over semantics” can be interpreted as a belittling comment about the arguments, or can be interpreted as a heightened value of semantics; when most arguments are not over some other serious conflict. The phrase can be interpreted as taking something trivial and proclaiming its importance. Given a level of background knowledge, the phrase can be linked to the philosophy of Wittgenstein. None of the interpretations are equivalent or exclusionary.

“Wrong Flyer” presents with a piece offering minimal visual information. This lack of visual guidance encourages indeterminacy in meaning or interpretation. The minimal amount of visual information is like the lack of a manual for a radical translation. It is a bare structure, which could have been covered with anything, but remains skeletal. It is a piece about failure, or loss, or invention, or gender, or disaster, or history, and is open to a number of interpretations. “What We’ve Got Here is a Failure to Communicate” presents an indeterminacy as to whether the objects are representing these tools of communication or the idea of communication. The ideas of technology, obsolescence, breakdowns in communication, and also the concept of the imposter are available in this piece. It is unclear which of these concepts is primary and which are ulterior.

Wittgenstein famously wrote “We do not know whether the sun will rise tomorrow” (Wittgenstein, 1923, 6.36311.) In that same light, I do not clearly know of the future directions of my art practice. However, I want to continue to make humourous work, which deals with language and interpretation and blurs the line between success and failure. I am looking at perceived failure as both subject matter and a way to open up avenues of interpretation; true failure would be a determined and fixed meaning that would abruptly end the dialogue between the work and viewer.

In creating the final body of work, “What We’ve Got Here is a Failure to Communicate,” for exhibition in the graduate show, I came to realize what I would refer to as a seriality in my art practice. When the viewer looks across multiple works, my hope is that a cumulative sense of the language builds. I see now that the work can develop as a lexicon, or alphabet, which makes the reading of any singular work complex. There are visual cues and thematic cues, which span across multiple works, and gradually let you know what the work is meant to communicate. My most recent work has begun to contain more of this seriality within a single work; more of my lexicon, my visual and thematic clues, are compacted within one
artwork, and as such this work appears to have engendered more discussion and dialogue. I would therefore like to pursue this way of addressing my own practice as a way to further develop its potential for audience reception. Part of this process might be to adopt a more generous position in relation to the viewer, to provide for more refined entry points into the work, and ease of interpretation.


Cambridge University, Research Features, July 5th, 2011

http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/features/wittgenstein's-camera/


http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag05/june_05/webspecs/evans.shtml


