



Art + text

deconstructing the language barrier in art museums

"... ism, ism, ism, ism, the words flying around him like buzzing insects. Why couldn't these fellows talk normally? wondered Maneck."

from *A fine balance*, 1995

Those of you who have read Rohinton Mistry's novel *A fine balance* will know that Maneck, recently arrived in the city to study refrigeration mechanics as the Emergency descended over India, was talking about politics rather than art. But his words express a sentiment that is felt by many who try to make sense of texts written about art – whether capitalism, imperialism, nationalism ... or ... modernism, expressionism, formalism ... 'ism' words are everywhere.

For non-arty people, the language of art is not just a bit heavy going; it can be utterly impenetrable. Why? Is it the words – too many 'isms', too much jargon? Is it the grammar and syntax – the way the sentences are put together? Is it the content? And when a text does seem make a meaningful connection even with the art layperson, how did that happen?

In recent years there has been a proliferation of texts, both written and other forms, *within* exhibitions and *alongside* artworks in art museums. The view that 'art speaks for itself' has mellowed, replaced instead with a growing acceptance that visitors both desire and benefit from information that provides context to the works they are looking at. This trend makes it timely to look in detail at the structures of these texts – at paragraphs, sentences, phrases and even single words – to uncover the features that can impede understanding.

This paper presents some preliminary results of a pilot study that looks how well certain 'art words' are understood outside the arts community. The study involves a

questionnaire which asks respondents to define 15 words which have a high-frequency in texts produced by art museums for visitors (wall texts, brochures etc) with the instruction 'In thinking about art, what do you understand these words or expressions to mean.' Words included in the study are: impressionism, minimalism, expressionism, primitive, formal, iconographic, gouache, vanitas, appropriation, arte povera, chiaroscuro, modernism, primitivist, postmodernism, materiality.

The sample size so far is 26. This in itself has suggested a first finding: that people are highly reluctant to reveal their knowledge of art words. Every person when asked if they would participate in a small research project, which would take about 15 minutes of their time, agreed with enthusiasm, but once they realised the nature of the task, they panicked: 'Oh no, I can't do this', 'Oh, I'm going to be really bad', 'You've got to be joking' ... Two out of three initially enthusiastic subjects immediately changed their mind, or discontinued after attempting the first question, and the 26 who remained all needed considerable coaxing to continue. Every person who completed the questionnaire was apologetic and embarrassed on handing it back.

Bearing in mind that this is only a pilot study and a very small sample, the results so far suggest – even among tertiary-educated, well-read, 'culturally active' adults – a level of understanding of this group of commonly used 'art words' that is very poor.¹ With one exception: impressionism. Ninety-six per cent of respondents could define 'impressionism' in that they could identify key attributes of French / 19th century / light and colour / fleeting impression. But not so with the other 'isms':

* only 39% knew what 'expressionism' was – many thought it was the same as impressionism. Several of those who did know, weren't sure (eg 'a style of painting that developed in the early 20th century – displays feeling rather than form??')

* 'minimalism' was fairly well understood (33%) in the sense of 'simplification', 'lack of detail' but not in the respect of the artistic movement

* 'modernism' (11% correct) and 'postmodernism' (5%) were very poorly understood. These terms were generally seen as entirely chronological, but there was confusion about exactly when (eg, modern = 'early 20th century', 'after the war – or maybe between the wars'; postmodernism = 'after modernism – after world war II')

Looking quickly at the results in terms of three other groups of words:

First are those which are **particular** to the subject of art – vanitas, chiaroscuro, gouache, arte povera. It is clear that these words were not understood by the sample. Most subjects did not even attempt a response:

- * vanitas – 93% no response [correct 0 / incorrect 7]
- * arte povera – 69% no response [correct 15 / incorrect 16]
- * gouache – 57 % no response / 41% correct [correct 30 / incorrect 13]
- * chiaroscuro – 77% no response [correct 16 / incorrect 7]

Here, it seems, the subjects did not know the meaning of these words and they knew they did not. Using these words without explanation thus leaves gaps in the intended message. Visitors walk away with an *incomplete* message, and, it seems, a sense of feeling unsatisfied, excluded, perhaps annoyed, or even stupid. As one subject commented – 'I like going to galleries to see the art but I always come away feeling stupid – like a kid on an excursion who's always got the wrong question'.

The second group contains words that **exist in common** usage but have a particular meaning within the subject area of art – formal/ism, modern/ism, and others like pictorial. Here there was a shift in the pattern of responses compared to the 'jargon' words, with a larger number of respondents *answering* the question rather than not responding. Unlike the first group, subjects often thought they knew the meaning of these words. Using these words without explanation thus makes it likely that visitors will apply an incorrect meaning and misunderstand the intended message:

- *modernism – 69% incorrect [20% no response / correct 11]
- *postmodernism – 69% incorrect [26% no response / correct 5]
- *formal – 85% incorrect [15% no response / correct 0]

Formal is a particularly interesting example as the incorrect meaning most often applied ('classical' or 'traditional') generally fits well in the context, leaving the reader with no suggestion that might challenge the meaning that he or she has applied. These words are thus problematic in a different way to the jargon words, and perhaps represent more of a problem because they are often overlooked as sources of difficulty.

The third group of words evident in this study is the '**tricky transformation**', again a feature quite common in art writing. Here a generally known word with a known meaning is disguised, or hidden, by altering the base word: figure to figuration, interior

to interiority, physical to physicality, primitive to primitivist, material to materiality etc. Responses in the questionnaire suggest that these seemingly minor word transformations caused a major disruption in meaning-making: it is reasonable to assume that everyone knows what 'material' means, but add 'ity' and 73% did not attempt to define it. 'Primitive' was understood by 65% of the sample but this dropped to 5% when the suffix 'ist' was added.

Within sentences the effect of these various features becomes cumulative, adding to the overall complexity and wordiness so that the meaning is often obscured.

Compare:

The artist, through the **materiality** of the paint, mediates the transition and spatial flux between oceanic, landscape and cosmic space. Heavily applied, the painterly viscosity brings a three-dimensional**ity** to the work into which the viewer can visually dive.

with:

The artist uses the paint itself to suggest the transition between ocean, land and sky. The thickly applied paint creates a three-dimensional quality which almost invites the viewer to 'dive' into the work.

The point of this study, the significance of these results, is not to suggest that we need to strip texts of all these words, for, as well as helping visitors to experience, enjoy and understand art, art museums play an important role in extending their understanding of the language of art, perhaps even helping them to enjoy its distinctiveness and richness. But even the preliminary results of this study show that it is important to use them with great care: to use them sparingly, and, when they are used, to define them explicitly or ensure that the context makes the meaning clear.

Although not represented in this study, I want briefly to touch on three other features common in texts produced by art museums.² First is the process of **objectifying** the artist. Here the word 'the artist' or the 'artist's' is used instead of their name or the pronouns he, she, his her, them, their etc. This feature is interesting in that at first it doesn't seem especially significant – it doesn't make a text 'look' more difficult. But it can have a significant impact in two key ways: first it's often grammatically confusing, especially when more than one artist is referred to in a particular sentence, and it's also odd, because we don't normally write like this.

For example, compare:

In many of Bush's paintings **the artist** has manipulated colour to work against the realism of **the** imagery, such as the *Venetian red* series in which rural scenes **were painted** entirely in a rich monochrome red.

with:

In many of Bush's paintings **he has** manipulated colour to work against the realism of **his** imagery. For example, in **his** *Venetian red* series **he painted** rural scenes entirely in a rich monochrome red.

In the first example, the slippage between active and passive, and between named identity ('Bush') and the generic 'the artist', suggests that more than one identity is involved. It also has a powerful effect in depersonalising the artist: replacing a name and 'human' pronouns reconfigures the artist from a person to a thing. Thus a seemingly innocuous shift in vocabulary plays a role in a matrix of strategies which seem to deliberately depersonalise the artist (for example, placing biographical information in a footnote rather than the main chapter or label text, or in separate biographical notes). Yet for most people, understanding the person behind the art helps make it interesting and relevant. As with history, science or any other subject, personalising the 'players' as real people rather than one-dimensional agents helps create empathy, meaning and understanding.

The second feature is the process of **nominalisation**, where words such as verbs and adjectives or entire phrases are turned into nouns (eg 'to create' → 'creation'; 'other people' → 'the other'; 'a cinematic work' → 'the cinematic'; 'the material qualities of a work' → 'materiality'). When groups of words are turned into nouns, meaning becomes collapsed into very small components. This is great for readers who are familiar with the subject area, and seemingly for label writers, where there is always such pressure on length, but it creates significant difficulties for readers who are unfamiliar with the subject.

For example, two sentences:

Bacon uses wild and exuberant brushstrokes to paint figures which express a deep sense of anguish. They make us feel profoundly unsettled.

are collapsed into one:

The anguish of Bacon's wildly exuberant expressive gestural figuration is profoundly unsettling.

A full sentence:

The experience immerses us.

becomes only half a sentence, so a whole new idea can be added:

The immersive visual experience ...

This packing in of meaning into extremely tight grammatical frames – this density – is no doubt the most obvious feature of much art writing. I have written elsewhere about the differences between spoken and written language and the significance of these differences to the level of text density, and also about the role of physical factors – both the manner of presentation of the text itself (font, type size, spacing between lines etc) and the physical surroundings (competing stimuli, light, social groups etc).³ All these factors contribute to the ease with which readers can take meaning from a message and are critical in creating meaningful and effective exhibition texts. So too is **theming**: our brains find it easier to understand and remember information that is well organised rather than random. Within an exhibition (and indeed throughout a gallery or museum as a whole), theming can – and should – occur at multiple levels, from the initial experience of the exhibition down to each paragraph on an individual object or artwork label.

At the macro level, a clear introductory statement acts as a conceptual orientation to the experience that lies ahead. Such a statement provides a thematic overview by answering the questions 'what is this exhibition and why is it here?' For example:

Collection focus room

This room presents a changing program of special exhibitions which focus primarily on aspects of the gallery's extensive collection of photographs and works on paper (prints, drawings and watercolours). These works are often the most intimate, immediate and compelling works in the collection. They are also among the most fragile, vulnerable to the effects of even low levels of light, and can be displayed for only short periods at a time.

The exhibitions will change every two months allowing the full range of the collections, from the 19th century until now, to be displayed.

or:

This is an exhibition about place, artistic adventure and chance encounters. Its chief subject and setting is a remote, windswept island off the Briton coast, called Belle-Isle. The unpredictable Atlantic Sea pounds the island's rugged, western shore, and each of the artists in the exhibition found its steep cliffs and wild seas challenging and liberating subjects ...⁴

At the micro level, the structuring of sentences within paragraphs should maintain a clear thematic focus, not chop and change with each new sentence.

Compare:

The 'two-cornered' basket is unique to the rainforest region inland from Cairns in Queensland. **Both men and women** made these distinctively shaped baskets for carrying food and personal belongings. **The shape of the base** made these ideal traps or sieves when secured in streams. **They** were traded northwards and exchanged for bark blankets.

with:

The distinctive form of the 'two-cornered' basket is unique to the rainforest region inland from Cairns in Queensland. Used by both men and women for carrying food and personal belongings, **these baskets** were traded northwards and exchanged for bark blankets. **The shape of their base** also made them ideal fish traps or sieves when secured in streams.

In the first example, the theme changes almost with each new sentence, whereas in the second, 'basket' remains the thematic element throughout the paragraph.

There's not the time in this session to explore this in detail but Louise Ravelli at UNSW and Linda Ferguson have done a great deal of work in this area and published some excellent guides.⁵

The final feature I want to mention in this paper concerns the issue of visual literacy – the ability to look at an image and interpret it beyond the most basic way (what can I see, do I like it?). While this is almost second nature to art curators, it appears to be something of great difficulty for many members of the public. There is a real difference between texts which simply describe what can be seen:

The four small black squares visually anchor the corners. In other paintings lines or letters are scattered across the surface ...

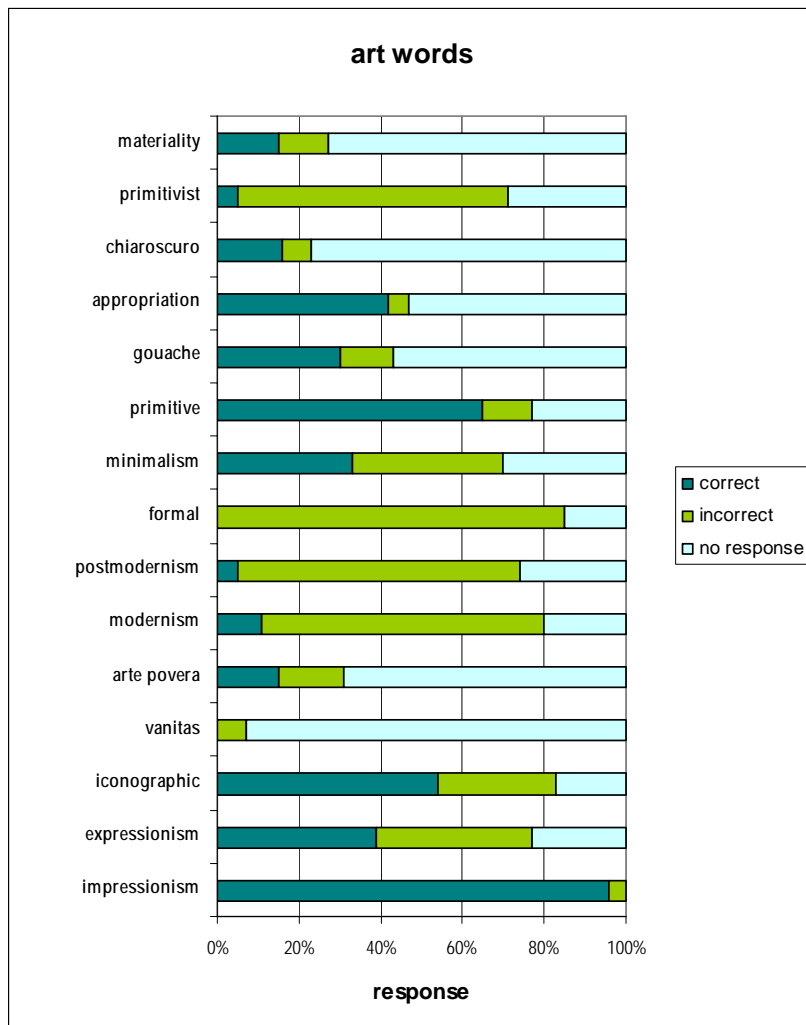
and those which show visitors how to move from the seen to the unseen by modelling the process 'reading' the different layers of a work:

The four small black squares visually anchor the corners, like clamps holding a page to a board or wall. In the same vein, the black rectangle, complete with traces of a lesson, suggests a blackboard. Other paintings have letters scattered across them, or are inscribed with lines ambiguously reminiscent of a trigonometry lesson ...

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The language of art can be a significant barrier to many readers, but it doesn't have to be. Awareness among art writers of the linguistic features which are likely to cause problems and in most cases some relatively minor changes to wording and sentence structures can make a huge difference: a difference that will support visitors in their engagement with art rather than baffle, confuse or intimidate them.

Art words pilot study: preliminary scores



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¹ The results presented in this paper are preliminary only and will be rescored when a larger sample has been collected. These preliminary results suggest that, when rescored, it would be helpful to include the further response category of 'partially correct'

² These features manifest at the syntactical/sentence level so are not evident in the present study

³ See 'Dumbing down ... or up? The power of language in museums' paper presented to the Museums Australia National Conference, Melbourne 2004

⁴ From *Belle-Ile: Monet, Russell & Matisse in Brittany*, Art Gallery of New South Wales 2002; L2 galleries, Art Gallery of New South Wales 2005

⁵ See Louise Ravelli, *Museum texts: communication frameworks*, Routledge, New York 2006; Linda Ferguson, Carolyne MacLulich & Louise Ravelli, *Meanings and messages: language guidelines for museum exhibitions*, Australian Museum, Sydney 1995