

“Conversations” in image and text: Fictive interaction in artists’ statements and accompanying artworks

Some artists “talk” to their paint. Abstract artist Masako Kamiya says, “I engage in a dialogue with paint. My statement is each dot I make with the brush, then I respond intuitively to each unexpected play of dots” (Zevitas 2003b:65). Other artists, such as painter Joseph Biel, instead “speak” to a human audience: “The drawings function for me as a language ... It is my hope that they will communicate with a sense of potency to whatever audience receives them” (Zevitas 2003a:17). Why does Kamiya metaphorically “converse” with her materials, while Biel metaphorically “addresses” an audience? And is it a coincidence that Kamiya and Biel produce dramatically different types of artwork?

In my examination of 160 artists’ statements and 480 paintings from four sequential volumes of *New American Paintings*, I found that variations in the use of fictive interaction (here, metaphoric blends conceptualizing art as “speech”) in artists’ statements corresponded with artists’ tendency to produce either representational art (which incorporates identifiable subject matter) or non-representational art (which involves only abstract shapes and colors). I argue that artists tend to use conceptual blends with entailments that are harmonious with the goals of their artistic genre. This suggests that conceptual structures evidenced in one modality (here, language in artists’ statements) may correlate with effects in another modality (the artists’ paintings); and that the choice of artistic genre can be related to effects in both modalities.

I found that all kinds of artists employ fictive interaction to describe their work, using terms such as *language*, *conversation*, and *narrative*. However, representational artists talk about “languages” of images or subject matter, whereas non-representational artists prefer “languages” of colors and forms. This distinction leads to differences in these artists’ metaphoric usage of other words related to language, such as *vocabulary*, *words*, and *translation*. Additionally, many representational artists strive to accurately represent a subject, which leads to concerns with artistic “truthfulness” that are not shared by non-representational artists.

Perhaps most strikingly, representational artists “speak” to their viewers, whereas many abstract artists either “talk” with their own art materials, or let the elements of their art “converse” amongst themselves. This difference in “audience” aligns with a difference in the topics that artists “discuss” using their work. Representational artists “tell stories” implied by their subject matter, whereas non-representational artists “tell the story” of their own painting process. Representational artists, who focus on “describing” subject matter, tend to compare their work to genres of descriptive prose such as “journalism” and “biography”. Non-representational artists are more likely to consider their work as “poetry”.

These divergent uses of fictive interaction generate different entailments about the creative process and its goals. It seems, then, that representational and non-representational artists tend to use blends with entailments that are compatible with their artistic values and objectives. These correlations are apparent only when we compare modalities (image and text) and genres (representational and non-representational artwork) – which demonstrates the importance of considering multiple genres and modalities when studying conceptual structures such as fictive interaction.

References:

Pascual, Esther

2002 *Imaginary Trialogues: Conceptual Blending and Fictive Interaction in Criminal Courts* (Utrecht: LOT Dissertation Series).

Pascual, Esther

2008 “Fictive interaction blends in everyday language and courtroom settings,” in *Mental Spaces in Discourse and Interaction*, edited by Anders Hougaard and Todd Oakley (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins).

Zevitas, Steven T., ed.

2002a *New American Paintings Vol. 41*, Sept.

Zevitas, Steven T., ed.

2002b *New American Paintings Vol. 42*, Nov.

Zevitas, Steven T., ed.

2003a *New American Paintings Vol. 43*, Jan.

Zevitas, Steven T., ed.

2003b *New American Paintings Vol. 44*, March