

Things Made Possible by Things That Aren't

By Jason Wonnell

The communication chain assumes a Source that, through a Transmitter, emits a Signal via a Channel. At the end of the Channel the Signal, through a Receiver, is transformed into a Message for the Addressee. Since the Signal, while traveling through the Channel, can be disturbed by Noise, one must make the Message redundant, so that the information is transmitted clearly. But the other fundamental requirement of this chain is a Code, shared by the Source and the Addressee. A Code is an established system of probabilities, and only on the basis of the Code can we decide whether the elements of the message are intentional (desired by the Source) or the result of Noise.

Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare, Umberto Eco -1983

Within the model of communication quoted above, artists and authors can be assumed to be the source, at least in the traditional sense. In that position we possess a certain amount of control, or influence over the signal, the message and the code in which it is arranged. In that traditional sense of visual arts, the role of the signal can be applied to a painting or sculpture. The channel may be the gallery, or a review in a newspaper or on a website. Even in the case of purely aesthetic abstract and minimalist works there remains a certain amount of aesthetic code employed, both by the source and by the addressee, regardless of whether the codes at each end agree. But as Eco goes on to discuss, while the ubiquitous bombardment of media increases with growing numbers of sources and messages, what is received by the addressee is not individual messages but a, “global ideological lesson, a call to narcotic passiveness”, described by some as the triumph of mass media over individual human freedom. But in this apocalyptic view what are not recognized are the individualized codes through which the addressees decipher the messages.

Eco believes that we are engaged in the birth of a new human freedom in what he

describes as “The death of the Gutenbergian human.” This is a new phase in communication where individuals are accustomed to a new way of deciphering media and its messages, wherein the social, economic, and psychological situations of the individual addressees mold and influence the codes by which the addressee deciphers the message. Through the conscious acknowledgement that as media becomes more centrally controlled and the differences in the many messages have become subsumed and leveled out through saturation, it becomes clear that the pertinent lessons to be found in media are no longer in the messages but in the unique codes through which they are deciphered by the addressee. In this new world not only is the media not the message, but the message is not the message.

This shift in how media is consumed may begin to explain the rise in artists who no longer seek to convey a singular message in their work, at least not through the traditional channels. Micheal Pinsky’s work, *I’m Laughing at the Clouds* consists of an array of nine lampposts erected on the campus of Anglia Ruskin University. The posts are sensitive to touch and record the frequency of a person’s pulse. This data is expressed through the lights at the top of each post as well as samples of sung heartbeats of children from a nearby nursery school. In this case the artists gives up the role of the source, providing only the channel and the origin code and thereby creating a situation where the viewer/participant takes on the role of both the addressee and the source of the message. This type of work seems to recognize that the message is not the message and that the noise created by such a feedback loop carries it’s own meaning that deserves our attention.

With these ideas in place I feel I can more easily discuss the matter at hand; **things that aren’t**. Messages that aren’t the message, transmitters that don’t transmit, receivers that do not receive, signals carrying codes without a message, or a message without a code, and any other combinations that break from the traditional structure of media and communication provide a new way to engage with the system outside the collective message and acknowledge the unique experiences of the individual in the role of the addressee. These works of **things that aren’t** engage with what Barthes described as the third meaning, they “outplay meaning” and “compel an interrogative meaning.”

But the realm of **things that aren't** is much broader than these terms. The task of defining what **is not** is intrinsically tied to defining what can be. In *Understanding Poststructuralism*, James Williams describes the structuralist method of categorization in terms of a core that acts as the center of what **is**, informing the limits of what **can be**. Williams argues that within this model the core can only be defined by its limits, like a territory is defined and proven by its borders. This circular relativity can create a false core that acts to suppress differences and fails to allow for “pure differences” that coexist without being in opposition of one another. If we refuse any model of classification that relies on opposition and exclusion we arrive at a conclusion that every **thing is**, and it can only be through the construct of language that **things aren't**.

Returning to Eco's model of media communication, freed from the structure of core versus limit, we can appreciate the differences in codes the addressee uses to decipher messages as pure differences that are not in opposition to one another. We can accept that a shared code between the source and the addressee is not required for a communication to hold value. Categorizing things that aren't is not a practice in exclusion, but rather inclusion, the inclusion of possibility, of potential, and of conversations otherwise shut down by all the things that are.

Works Referenced:

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