Interactive Art Interpretation: How Viewers Make Sense of Paintings in Conversation

Kurt A. Bruder
Emerson College

Ozum Ucok
University of Texas at Austin

This study explores the talk of viewers as they encountered paintings in an art gallery. An inductive analysis of conversations recorded between viewers and one of the researchers resulted in the identification of three categories of art talk: Evaluation, Attraction, and Storytelling. Further, the authors distinguish two design features governing this kind of talk, Narration and Reification.

Viewers verbalize their experience of paintings in order to interactively manufacture meaning. This sense-making process is consequential not merely for the viewers' understanding of the artwork but for their conception of the world, and of themselves and others in it. Perhaps most significant, viewers employ artwork as a material and symbolic resource in the ceaseless interactive fabrication of their own identities.

Among the overwhelming number of objects that human beings experience in their everyday lives are a variety of works of art. Fine art, pop art, commercial art, performance art—all vie for the attention and appreciation of viewers across the many social contexts that make up our worlds.

This study examines the sense-making process that human beings undertake with respect to one such aesthetic product, fine art paintings. The reader may reflect on her or his own history with artwork, recalling the sometimes positive, sometimes indifferent, sometimes negative texture of such experiences. But always, the moment of encounter with a work of art implies specifically interpretive processes. As we demonstrate, this interpretation is an interactive accomplishment—even if one is viewing the artwork by oneself—and it is consequential for the subjectivity of the person doing it.

The authors of this study share a long-standing interest in art; indeed, we would...
identify ourselves as artists, if only amateurs. As social scientists, we are especially interested in the power of art to elicit feeling (and its expression) across a wide range of genres and audiences. Anecdotal evidence indicates the possibility of a systemic relationship between art and human subjectivity, calling for formal inquiry into the fact and manner of people's employment of images as a material substrate in the symbolic organization of the individual's self-structure.

This study integrates two domains of scholarship, namely, literature treating fine art and art history, on the one hand, and that concerning the social construction of reality, on the other. A great amount of theoretical effort has been directed to the process of art interpretation (Berger 1972; Gombrich 1961, 1982, 1985; Gombrich, Hochberg, and Black 1972; Goodman 1976; Mitchell 1994; Nelson and Shiff 1996; Schapiro 1996). The symbolic construction of meaning and of the "self" in and through discourse, too, has received substantial scholarly attention (Burkitt 1991; Harré and Gillett 1994; Mead 1934). Combining lessons culled across these literatures, this essay investigates people's social activities as organized around their viewership of paintings, a species of communication through which aesthetic meanings are interactively constructed, expressed, and experienced by—and reflexively shape—the viewers.

By engaging in conversation about paintings—in effect, verbalizing the visual experience—a recursive symbolic relationship between things said and things seen is established and exhibited. In the following pages, we first distinguish the essentially communicative character of the viewer's interpretive encounter with works of art. Second, we examine viewers' talk about paintings, talk that at once exhibits and generates the viewers' aesthetic experience. Finally, we discuss certain design features governing art talk that may be abstracted from conversations with viewers.

ART VIEWERSHIP AS COMMUNICATION

Treating even a solitary individual's interpretive encounter with a work of art as essentially interactive may initially seem counterintuitive. After all, in such a case, who's talking to whom? We may begin with the communicative effort of the artist with respect to the viewers of the work of art. But the problems of temporality (i.e., the delay between completion of the work and any actual viewing), agency (i.e., once completed, the work and its display are matters usually out of the artist's hands), and directionality (i.e., the one-sidedness of the artist's effort in the face of the improbability of viewer response) may give us pause when attempting to reckon with the communicative capacity of art.

Far more interesting for our present purposes are the implications of the insights of the symbolic interactionists regarding the inherently social nature of even such apparently private processes as thought, affect, and judgment—procedures through which viewers likely assemble this aesthetic experience. Mead (1934) argues that the social act is constituted by interaction of different individuals, which involves the adjustment of the conduct of each to the other. However, the same social mech-
anism is implicated in the formation and operation of internal reflexive capacities such as sensing oneself, thinking, and feeling. The public gestures exchanged in interaction provide the model and means even for one’s private experience. “Even when we are alone, our introspective thinking takes place in the form of an internal conversation with our own self, mediated by social language and meanings” (Burkitt 1991:37).

Whenever one communicates, one arouses in oneself a response analogous to that which one calls out in the other. In strictly internal conversations (such as those that might occur when viewing works of art), the process is no less productive of response; it is simply a question of who is responding to whom. The subject—instead of acting and reacting with respect to another subject (who occurs as a separate object)—reflexively responds to the self-as-object, simultaneously enacting both the subject and object roles (the object here occurring as identical to the subject). We may therefore stipulate that every activity in which human beings are engaged will be essentially social in character, even those occurring in the physical absence of others. In the context of this article, one viewing paintings by oneself will necessarily engage in precisely the form of internal dialogue just described—indicating as well as constituting the socially interactive nature of the interpretive process—irrespective of the content of that dialogue.

Furthermore, we may understand any given work of art that viewers encounter as an object to which they respond as a kind of “third party” to their ongoing internal dialogue. One’s interpretive response to the art object is a function of—and constitutive feature in—one’s incessant selfing process (Bruder 1998). The artwork is doubly implicated in the viewer’s sense-making activities, with respect to both its own aesthetic merits—as an evaluation of an object by the subject—and one’s own recursive efforts at self-definition—as a representation of oneself-as-object (adopting an evaluative position toward the artwork) to and by oneself-as-subject. As Harris and Sandresky observe:

Mead sees art as providing imagery in terms of which we take the role of another and/or the generalized other, processes which are crucial to the development of the self and to dealing with new things. Mead (1982) argues against a distinction between the internal and external world and goes on to say “... what we see in the external world is partly due to our filling in” (p. 106). Thus, the external is, to a certain extent, created in the process through which symbols are developed. (1985:295)

Artwork can be conceptualized, therefore, as a medium by which people create and sustain symbolic links between the within and the without.

METHODOLOGY

Our purpose was to analyze the symbolic operations through and around which (at least some) people produce order in the act of art interpretation, in the hope of disclosing regularities in the social activities underlying and organizing viewers’ expe-
riences of art. While acknowledging the necessarily contrived nature of our observational efforts, we endeavored to approximate the ordinary experience of art viewership as much as possible.

We solicited and analyzed viewers’ talk about paintings in a typical site for their display. The site of data collection was the Harry Ransom Center, located on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin. Exhibits are housed on two floors, although the researcher accompanied visitors only on the first floor. The first floor features one hundred paintings (out of a total of 1,100 in the permanent collection) in an area of approximately 11,000 square feet. These paintings represent two separate collections: 20th-Century American Art and Art of the American West (19th Century).

Such a site presents a prototypical context for conversations about works of art (as compared with, for example, one’s own home or a restaurant). The conversations between viewers and the researcher took place in the immediate presence of paintings, rather than at some spatiotemporal remove, in order to minimize the reconstructive character of the viewers’ aesthetic-interpretive experience. Our analysis focused on talk generated by viewers in situ—while actually interpreting art objects—instead of relying on solicited recollections of their experience (whether in the form of talk or text) because we believe that the latter are at best extensions and artifacts of the interpretive moment.

Among the visitors were students, groups of schoolchildren, tourists, and elderly people. The second author approached adult patrons when they entered the gallery and asked if she could accompany them as they viewed the paintings and discuss their thoughts and feelings; no visitor declined to participate. Some visitors who agreed to participate had come to the museum with at least one other person; in every case, although not specifically requested to do so, these others absented themselves for the duration of the encounter with the researcher.

Researchers spent from five to thirty minutes with reviewers, with the average encounter lasting approximately ten minutes. Fifty-five such conversations were recorded on audiotape. No background information was solicited from participants, although several offered personal data, such as their field of educational training (e.g., “I am an art student too”; “I got my B.A. in painting”) or lack of technical expertise (e.g., “I have no idea on paintings”). We felt that the deliberate collection of personal information might give the viewer the impression that they were participating in an “opinion poll” rather than having a conversation about works of art.

Art appreciation is, quite commonly, a social occasion. It is not unusual for people to attend museums and art galleries in the company of others (Silverman 1990, 1995; cf. Draper 1984), so they are used to discussing their experiences as they view art objects. When folks visit an art gallery, they do not interview each other. Rather, they engage in conversation, asking such questions as “What do you think?” In keeping with our wish to preserve (as much as possible) the conversational tone of these encounters, in addition to “What do you think?” the only questions asked of viewers were those designed to probe for clarity and greater interpre-
tive depth; specifically, “What do you mean by that?” “Could you explain this a bit more?” and “Why do you think so?” While some viewers displayed an initial hesitancy in their responses to the researcher’s questioning, all seemed to become relaxed in a short time, as evidenced by the increased fluency and duration—and the forthcoming nature—of their replies as the conversation progressed.

People typically select paintings that they would like to view for themselves (although there are certainly cases in which one viewer will lead another to a painting for the purposes of showing and sharing). We allowed viewers to select the paintings they wanted to view and discuss, instead of directing them to specific paintings. Viewer’s selections included a variety of paintings, such as abstract (expressionist, cubist), realistic (landscapes, portraits, western scenes), and so-called optical art.

We avoided preformulated category systems (i.e., those constructed in advance of actual observation of interaction in a particular setting), not wishing to distort features of the interactive phenomena under investigation (Psathas 1990:8). Consistent with a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), data gathering, analysis, and theory construction were done simultaneously. Three types of coding were used in the analysis of data: open coding (in naming and categorizing phenomena), axial coding (in making connections between categories and subcategories), and selective coding (in selecting the core category and relating it to other categories; see Strauss and Corbin 1990). Through repeated listening to the fifty-five recorded conversations between viewers and researcher, we identified recurring themes that were manifest in people’s verbal representation of their aesthetic experience, and, as patterns of similarity in expression emerged, we subsequently grouped viewers’ utterances under the headings discussed in the next section.

ANALYSIS OF VIEWER TALK

Three inductively derived categories of talk organized around paintings emerged: Evaluation, Attraction, and Storytelling. Below we provide excerpts of viewer talk that are suggestive of these categories and their respective subcategories. Where gender-specific pronouns appear, they represent the sex of the viewer whose talk is being discussed.

Evaluation

Most of the time, conversations about paintings begin with an evaluative statement: an assertion as to the value, significance, or quality of a given painting. Through evaluation, viewers express their own conclusions about artwork. Four types of evaluative acts are identified: Preference, Judgment, Desire to Own, and Disclaimers.

Preference

The most frequent evaluative act observed in art talk was preference, or “any explicit statement of like or dislike” (Silverman 1990:100). Preferences were usually
offered immediately on viewing a particular painting, often apart from any interrogation (or with only the barest prompting) from the researcher. Preferences commonly featured no—or only slight—elaboration of reasons for liking (or otherwise) a given painting. Some examples of viewer talk depicting preference are “I don’t like it,” “I really like this painting a lot and also the color,” and “I love the lighting in it.”

Judgment

Distinct from mere expressions of preference, judgments include evaluations such as appreciation or criticisms, ideas, assumptions, beliefs, and feelings other than any explicit statement of like or dislike. In some cases, the viewer’s preference may be inferred from a judgment statement, but more than simple preference is indicated. Two types of judgments are distinguished: resolved judgments and reserved judgments.

Resolved judgments are those that reflect decided, determined conclusions about paintings without need for further elaboration. Here are some examples: “For me it’s ugly . . . they look like monsters . . . the persons look like cannibals . . . it’s ugly for me. I don’t like the colors”; “The one with the woman. I just— I just don’t care for it. I don’t think it’s beautiful.”

Another common sort of resolved judgment encountered in the recordings is the viewer’s comparison of the artist’s technical skills with her own: “You know it kind of surprises me because the artist is obviously a good artist. The artist would have thought of that . . . the artist is too good at—an artist to have made such a mistake”; “That one reminds me of a—something a grade school kid [would] draw. [Laughter] I don’t know, the sunset, hmm, the stripes, it looks like something a kid would do. . . . I couldn’t do it anyway”; “I always look at—stuff like that can—it looks like something a kid could do; but I wonder what makes it stand out—like, what has it be put in a frame and hang in a museum wall instead of on someone’s refrigerator door?”

Reserved judgments are opinions or conclusions that reflect openness to further consideration, analysis, and discussion. Decisions regarding paintings are suspended and the judgments offered are tentative: “I haven’t got to a clarity of a decision on it”; “I don’t yet—I just see what’s there and then I try to go beyond that.”

The more a person spends time with a painting, paying attention to it and trying to figure it out, the more she tends to see in it. Moreover, during their interaction with a painting, people’s ideas, perceptions, and attitudes about that painting might change: “If I look at it long enough, I might be able to see more . . . the more I look at it, the more I see”; “I’ve come here three times and looked at this painting before. Every time I come, I see a little bit more.”

Disclaimers

Disclaimers are a means to disown one’s judgment. Visitors sometimes offered such statements when the researcher questioned their assessments. After making an
evaluation (or, less commonly, in anticipation of assessment), viewers sometimes displayed their uncertainty regarding their own aesthetic judgments. Such viewers seem to have, in effect, dissociated themselves from the very discriminating act they are articulating. Perhaps such viewers felt incompetent to evaluate another's artistic work and, by hedging, reduced the jeopardy that insufficient aesthetic training might suggest if one made a too-decisive judgment in the absence of authority. Among the typical disclaimers are "I don't know"; "I like it, I don't know"; "I don't know why, but I don't like it"; "Seems like he could do it better. I mean it's just a few lines, I don't know."

Desire to Own

Desire to own (Silverman 1990:101) involves an expression of a wish to display or buy a painting in order to experience it on a more permanent basis. Such expressions implicate the viewer in a process of identification (or its converse) with a particular painting-object; the viewer treats the painting as an extension of the self (or as separate from the self), in an imaginative organization of her "personal preserve" (Goffman 1971). Among the most typical comments were "I'll buy this one"; "Wrap this one for me"; "I'd really have it in my house." Sometimes viewers expressed just the opposite sentiment, as in the following examples: "I wouldn't buy it"; "I wouldn't wanna' see this every day."

All four types of evaluation acts—preference, judgment, disclaimers, and desire to own—are ways through which viewers draw conclusions about the art objects they encounter.

Attraction

People are attracted to some paintings when they try to make sense of them. They feel attracted to, struck by, and feel a kind of connection to some paintings: "I find it very moving"; "It's really eye catching"; "It just draws me into it"; "It really hits you." Factors that affect attraction (as reflected in viewer talk about art) include color, subject matter, uncertainty associated with the painting, the urge to figure the painting out, and the technique employed.

Color

Color functions as an important attention-gathering device, in effect drawing people into paintings for further elaboration: "I was struck initially by the vibrance of the colors"; "The sun itself seems like fire. It's so alive." Vivid colors get most people's attention and communicate energy and dynamism. Also, even though a painting is considered a static artwork, the illusion of light creates the impression that there is movement in it, another important attention-gathering factor: "Look above, the light is coming... looks like it's coming from everywhere."
The pleasantness (or unpleasantness) of colors might play an important role in drawing people to the painting and affecting their judgments: "It’s ugly for me, I don’t like the colors"; “I really like the colors.” Visitors seem to make a positive relationship between judgment and color. Colors (or their combination) that are perceived as pleasant result in positive judgments about the painting in which they are used, and colors that are deemed unpleasant are used to account for negative judgments expressed about some paintings.

Subject Matter

Viewers’ preferences for realistic subject matter in paintings affect their attraction. The viewers encountered in this study consistently displayed attraction to realistic imagery, the most photograph-like style of depiction along a continuum from realistic to abstract paintings. While realistic paintings reflect features of concrete reality that people can readily distinguish, abstract paintings (typically) do not. The process of understanding a visual phenomenon without identifiable referents may lead to uncertainty, and therefore a visitor views the painting as complicated, difficult, and confusing. This results in more people showing preference for realistic paintings, as these examples illustrate: “I guess I like more realistic paintings, and this one is realistic; you can see all the features of divisions”; “As far as my tastes go, I usually like to have something with little form”; “What drew me to it was the clear-cut lines.” Most viewers indicate that abstract paintings confuse them or just “blow their minds.”

Enigma

Encountering a painting to which a viewer is drawn initiates a “trying to figure it out” experience. A painting is silent; it does not disclose itself to the viewer unless she engages herself in a process of figuring it out. Many paintings are not easy to decipher; the viewer experiences some uncertainty regarding such paintings, which may lead to confusion, puzzlement, and astonishment, as well as attraction and fascination. Two main dimensions of experiencing enigma, puzzlement and mystery, are discussed in the following paragraphs.

The viewer is aware that, at some point in time, another human being—who does not exist in the immediate viewing context—has created the artwork. Further, the viewer assumes the artist’s communicative intent while attempting to make sense of the painting. Here is an example of a viewer’s puzzlement:

What did the artist see that made him call [it] that? . . . [A]nd I can kind of see how he would see New York . . . that’s the amazing thing as—why I love to look at this. It’s like what, in the artist’s eye, like how did they look at New York and see this? You know, that’s what really amazes me—and makes me wanna look at art.

As viewers express their puzzlement, they also formulate assumptions regarding
the artist's intent in an effort to resolve it: "[I'm] trying to understand what the artist was doing by the, first of all, the separation of the right side and the left side"; "I think any artist working with [an] abstract medium is aware of the tradition that went before them and how people are gonna react to his work"; "It, to the artist I mean, it had some purpose. I sincerely hope [the artist] had some purpose in doing this work of art ... it just blows my mind."

This condition of uncertainty leaves a lot to the imagination of the viewer and invokes a conscious effort to infer or assign meaning. If the uncertainty associated with the imagery in a painting is too high, people lose interest and give up trying to figure out the painting. Minimally, paintings must possess recognizable visual elements, even if of a fantastic variety, for the viewer to be drawn in and engage in a process of sense making: "I am trying to figure out what the artist is trying to do, but I am confused"; "I am just utterly perplexed by this one"; "I don't understand it at all, I don't know what it is"; "What does it mean? Still, there is no meaning for me"; "The coarseness of the way the paint is put on leaves things ill defined."

Notice, in the last example, that the viewer accounts for her puzzlement over the painting in terms of its "ill-defined" character. Instead of helping the viewer to find her way in this painting puzzle, the way that the paint is applied makes things more complicated. It might be suggested that for this viewer, things are well defined when they are easily recognizable and resemble how things appear in real life. To grapple with the uncertainty associated with paintings, viewers must use their own imaginations to supply (if only tentatively) identifiable elements: "You feel that the day is ending, and yet it could be beginning as well"; "Maybe the child is not there, a kind of implied child, maybe that's the point. I don't know"; "Although it is not shown, there must be hyenas on the other side."

The second dimension to the experience of Enigma will be conceptualized as mystery. This mystery is not just an experience of curiosity—trying to figure it out and being confused by the ambiguity of the painting—but fascination and a kind of passion. Although not certain of the painting's meaning, the viewer is captivated and enchanted by it, as if compelled to contemplate it: "This guy over here, at first, I used to think this guy was the artist because it looks like an artist's palette he is holding. But then I thought, no, maybe that's part of the box, you know?"; "You look at it, you don't know what's going on here"; "Is he trying to put it in the box, take it out of the box? Who is this guy?" "Very exciting. What an action, trying to figure out what's going on"; "I love this one because I don't understand it ... I want to stand at this sunrise, sunset, forever"; "What's going on back there? It looks like the Serengeti is on fire. Is it?"

Viewers' talk reveals a sense of beguilement, an embodiment of their relation to the painting as an object demanding attention—even a species of affection. As if the artwork were exuding a seductive force, the viewer evinces a felt need to stay with it for a longer time than that called for in her encounter with other objects, a temporal investment richly rewarded with a uniquely satisfying sojourn into sense making—even if, perhaps, remaining perpetually unresolved.
Technique

In addition to color, subject matter, and the enigmatic qualities in a painting, how the artwork is fashioned also plays an important role in drawing people's attention. The application of paint, different brush strokes, and distortions in figures and objects affect viewers' perceptions. Some people are attracted to very thickly applied paint, whereas others prefer smooth applications where brush strokes cannot be seen: "What grabs me most about this is the detail of brush mark"; "Large paint—brush strokes on this one. It's like you can see the action of the painter when he was . . ."; "I like the way she uses paint. It is very gesturally, very—which adds more to the feeling of violence." Another viewer, fascinated by the illusion created by the thickness of the paint's application, states:

It's almost like he sculpted the painting out of the paint. I mean, this guy's face is pocked [packed?] with depth. . . . Some paintings, when you get close to them, the illusion goes away and you can see the brush marks and you go, "Oh, this is an illusion." But with this guy, the closer you get, even though you know it is an illusion, it still looks like a real face.

The manner of the paint's application adds depth to the image, giving the viewer the impression of three-dimensional reality. Even when one goes closer to the painting, one does not lose the illusion of reality altogether (which is not the case in many paintings). Ironically, the better a painting is able to capture the viewer with an impression of its realness, the more illusory it is. Discussing the criterion for realism in representation, Goodman (1976:34) states: "The test of realism is deception, that a picture is realistic to the extent that it is a successful illusion, leading the viewer to suppose that it is, or has the characteristics of, what it represents. The proposed measure of realism, in other words, is the probability of confusing the representation with the represented."

Another viewer indicated that she likes seeing the strokes as she approaches the painting. From far away the painting looks like a perfect representation of its subject, but one sees the brush strokes and other details (which could not be seen at a distance) as one gets closer to the painting, and the illusion of perfection goes away. This shift in perception, organized around the viewer's relative proximity to the image, calls attention to the viewer's aesthetic experience as a kind of prototypical "virtual reality." The viewer enacts a perceptual migration across the boundary separating the treatment of the image in the painting as real and as a product of artifice.

Deformed or misshapen representations are most commonly interpreted and characterized as distortions. Deviations from the ordinary conventions for painted imagery violate the taken-for-granted assumptions of the way things should be. Perception of the unfamiliar, the extraordinary, and the unknown in paintings lead to interpretations in which people compare the painted image with concrete reality. Viewers question the artist's intentions and skill, and tend to characterize the artist as deficient. While trying to figure out the painting, the viewer may assert that the artist has distorted some elements of the subject matter: "They really distorted cer-
tain parts of the body... [T]he faces are oversimplified and the chest area seems to be very realistic. And, then, the abdominal area in most of them has been enlarged, but the legs also seem to be pretty realistic too." The viewer calls attention to the simplified, enlarged, or exaggerated parts as distorted, whereas he approvingly identifies the images that represent phenomena as they ordinarily appear.

In sum, color, subject matter, enigma, and technique draw people into paintings. They are means by which viewers experience and interactively account for a felt attraction (or otherwise) to art objects.

**Storytelling**

The final category of talk about paintings that we examine is storytelling. Stories are a fundamental human instrumentality for making sense of the world: indeed, "[s]ince all socialized humans are storytellers, they are always in a potential storytelling situation when interacting with or encountering others" (Blumer 1931; quoted in Maines 1993:21). Stories help people to organize information into a coherent form and to establish conceptual connections among phenomena, as well as between themselves and objects in their worlds. Summarizing the several uses that people make of stories, Maines writes:

> There is consensus that stories and storytelling are ubiquitous and that most if not all societal activities could not take place without narratives (Gergen and Gergen 1988). These include socialization (Denzin 1988), production of group solidarity (Eder 1988; Maines 1991), community processes (Cochrane 1987; Lofland 1990) [and] cultural enactment (Howard 1991). (Maines 1993:20).

In the present study we noticed that people tend to make associations between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the strange, the real and the fantastic, and the self and the other in the process of making sense of paintings. They create narrative links between that which can be recognized (the known, the familiar, the real, the self) and that which cannot (the unknown, the unfamiliar, the fantastic, the other).

To make sense of things and create understanding, people need common reference points. Norms, measures, patterns, and models become reference points for people living together in a society. These are intersubjective, conventional arrangements (including routines, practices, and procedures) through which people come to a shared understanding. Such arrangements enhance similarity, conformity, and harmony, thereby reducing uncertainty, which people experience as discomforting and confusing (Festinger 1957). This sense-making effort is no less manifest in human aesthetic experience than in association with other features of the world.

Stories combine distinct elements to form a whole. In this section, we attempt to show that stories are a discursive medium by which viewers make meaningful associations in the interpretation of art objects. Putting information together into an orderly, coherent system requires establishing relations between phenomena. Disconnected facts, events, shapes, and figures do not form a unified whole. It takes sto-
rytelling to establish the connections requisite to manufacture a sense of coherence—and the impression that everything is okay—in and about the world.

Viewers appear to grasp at any available information in the midst of their interpretive process. It is quite common for viewers to incorporate verbal information—specifically, the painting's title—into their storytelling efforts at sense making. Some viewers seem to consult the title immediately; others do so only after regarding the imagery for a moment. The title is usually employed as a thematic resource, as a kind of "seed" for the development of the story-to-come. Here are some examples: "There is [sic] two ways of looking at a painting; you can just look at the painting without looking at the title and decide whether you like the painting without looking at the title, and then looking at the title and then coming back and saying, 'Oh, now I see what it is’; "I don’t understand it at all. I don’t know what it is. [Viewer approaches the painting and reads the title.] 'Millstone.' So that’s what it is. Easy"; "I usually like to read the titles to see like if the title matches what I see it as"; "It kind of shifts your perception of what it is when you find out what the title is, and you start looking for how is it that. Like what [did] the artist see that made him call [it] that?"

We found three sorts of stories in the talk of viewers in art interpretation: Enigmatic Stories, Imaginative Stories, and Self-Reflective Stories.

**Enigmatic Stories**

These stories reflect people’s ambiguity and puzzlement regarding the painting. Confused by a painting, people attempt to make associations and create meaningful, unified wholes. That is, they try to solve their puzzlement through the associations created between the familiar and the strange, the known and the unknown.

In the following example, the viewer, frustrated by his experience of a painting, expresses his feelings and thoughts while trying to make associations: "It puts me off, it puts me off . . . there is no, I guess, sort of order to it." Initially, the viewer is not able to find a pattern, a system of order in the painting; he is not able to discover any readily available associations between the painting’s imagery and his storehouse of recollected impressions from real life. His experience of ambiguity and confusion is tantamount to revulsion for the painting. As he continues his search for order in the painting, however, he is able—through storytelling—to construct a recognizable structure: "Here there is some, like, I don’t know, order in my mind. . . . I can almost feel like I can see like a person sitting." The viewer likens the abstract shapes to a person, but his uncertainty remains. Building on his findings in the painting, he likens the stripes to a crowd of people: "When I finally saw that this is a person sitting there, these black—I mean, the blue stripes really started looking like a crowd of people, I don’t know."

Another viewer starts his story by telling about the patterns of paint. Then he points out what he can recognize in the painting: “Paint here in certain patterns, it’s all—here is just patterns, but you look at it and you see the millstone, a man strug-
gling with it.” Identifying certain shapes in the painting as a human figure, the viewer shifts to his story with an animated question:

Who is this guy?! This guy over here. At first, I used to think this guy was the artist because it looks like an artist’s palette he is holding. But then I thought, no, maybe that’s part of the box, you know? And it’s just breaking off... I mean why has he got the millstone? What is it? Is he like—is he trying to put it in the box, take it out of the box? I mean, who is this guy? He is like huge and overweight!

The viewer organizes his story around the figure in the painting. He recounts his previous interpretation of the figure as the artist but now disavows that identification. Extending his search for meaning to other images in the painting, the viewer considers different possibilities regarding the nature of an object. He visualizes the object as a part of the box, which is breaking off, yet he cannot be sure. Stymied by the painting, the viewer urgently—if somewhat cautiously—identifies elements in the painting in an effort to resolve the enigma through an articulation of meaningful relationships.

Another viewer, struggling to make sense of the same painting, creates a rather different story:

I’ll tell you what feeling I get. Okay, he is a Mexican and the millstone represents oppression. The only thing that didn’t make me feel that way is this man’s hair. They are oppressed Mexicans, but this man’s hair is not dark... If this man’s hair was dark also, what I would get out of this is oppressed Mexicans. There is a saying about millstones in [the] United States that when you are carrying a heavy weight, it’s like carrying a millstone around your neck.

This viewer supplies a political narrative when interpreting the painting. Yet, even while constructing a story of downtrodden Mexicans, the viewer grapples with imagistic evidence that belies that interpretation. The figure’s light-colored hair is inconsistent with the viewer’s assumptions about Mexicans as people with dark hair, introducing a felt conflict between the viewer’s initial interpretation of the painting and certain of its features. The viewer then shifts his focus to the interpretation of the millstone as a symbol of oppression, accessing proverbial material to buttress his conclusion. The viewer appropriates extant stories to support his own story of the painting.

In trying to discover a sense of pattern in a painting, viewers create narrative associations between the imagery (and title) and familiar referents encountered in everyday life. The shape of the story is due, in part, to the qualities of the painting under inspection: enigmatic stories reflect viewers’ puzzlement at ambiguous imagery. The imaginative stories we consider next implicate viewers’ attempts to use words to “complete” the paintings they are interpreting.

**Imaginative Stories**

Artists commonly provide some recognizable visual clues that viewers are able to easily make sense of, while other elements in the painting are more obscure.
Much is left to the viewer's imagination, waiting to be interpreted. The viewer fills in these interpretive gaps using her imagination, often without much in the way of visual guidance from the painting. We have identified two types of imaginative stories, fantastic stories and realistic stories.

**Fantastic stories** are products of unrestrained creative imagination. They do not have grounds in the concrete material world but have existence only in the imagination. Such stories are characterized by the extraordinary, unusual, and exaggerated narrative elements:

> [There is] orange over here, doing a lot of spattering of orange. It's like—to me, that's a lemon that's just ripped off, and that's really a sick picture. Like the orange has been ripped off; blood is just gushing out and like this person over here is being just viciously like killed and ripped apart. And right here, this blue thing. That's like two people having sex. I mean, it's like this, they're having this sick twisted orgy kind of thing.

The viewer constructs a fanciful story of violence and sexuality, mixing metaphors of "blood gushing out" and a "sick twisted orgy" in accounting for the orange and blue shapes. The viewer demonstrates a vivid imagination and a negatively charged emotional reaction to the painting through the storytelling.

**Realistic stories**, although also the products of imaginative effort, are anchored in the experience of everyday life:

> This is called Romance. It depicts a young couple out in the moonlight walking. Even though it is moonlight, the colors are very bright. Maybe it's not moonlight; [it] actually may be the sun. I think that's the moon. You have a sense of they belong to each other because the shape of the figures inclines in the same direction. There is the sense that they're each about to take a step, so there's motion in this painting.

The viewer tells a story about a young couple walking in the moonlight. She expresses doubt concerning the identity of an element in the composition but concludes that it is the moon rather than the sun (despite the brightness of the colors), owing to the romantic theme. The viewer provides a warrant for her speculation that the figures are a couple by referencing her knowledge of the natural world; people who are with one another often orient toward a common direction (Kendon 1990). The viewer says that the figures are about to take a step, predicating the vividness of her story on the suggestion of motion in the painting. All these features of the painting narrated by the viewer are commonplaces in the real world. Here is another example:

> [It] looks like the man—two men and two women that seem to be affectionate towards each other. The two dark ones have women with their arms wrapped around them and then the lighter man on the bottom left seems to want, not gonna deal with them; either that or he is sleeping, you know? I can see he has real—no real contact, kind of disjointed. I don't know if he is snubbing them or just—and that seems kind of interesting, it makes me wonder why he is not included in this.
The viewer creates a story of affection between the figures in the painting. Then, elaborating on his story, he turns to the relationships among the figures. Specifying the darker figures as male characters and adding one more figure to the male characters later on, the viewer identifies three men in the painting. Suggesting that the two darker figures are in relationship with two other figures (which he identifies as women), the viewer conveys his curiosity regarding the nature of the relationship between the light-colored figure and the others. He states that the lighter man isolates himself. He mentions the possibility that the light-colored man might be sleeping; in any case, the figure is not in contact with the other figures in the painting. Such speculative stories about who’s with whom occur routinely in interactions among friends, the sort of anchoring in everyday social experience that characterizes this kind of narrative.

Other realistic stories include subjects such as cultural or societal events, problems, personalities, and narratives associated with them:

The darkness of the men would, you know, maybe would tend to indicate—maybe this is a racial prejudice that society has... You know, it's just kind of a—personally, I am very interested in and fascinated by interracial relationships and social prejudices against the—I—I personally don't find anything wrong with it, interracial relationships. I don't see there anything as there's—I see no barrier between race really but it, society likes to categorize.

When talking about the relationships between the figures in the painting, the viewer focuses on the darker figure who seems to be alone and isolated. Then he associates this separation with racial prejudices in society. Reflecting his personal thoughts and feelings about interracial relationships and social prejudices, he thematizes the figures in the painting as exemplifying problematic events and social relations in the real world. The viewer also compares his own thoughts and attitudes with those of society at large.

Here is another story:

This one over here made me think of—have you ever heard of or read Carlos Castaneda's books on Don Juan? They're about this guy, Carlos Castaneda, he [had] these experiences [with an] old Indian shaman—he goes through all this training, and these incredibly wild experiences beyond what you'd think of... There is a lot of description in his book about the desert scenes and places of power in the desert and all of this, it's rushing back to me with this painting.

The viewer interprets the painting in terms of another art form, the literature of a famous author. She recounts another's narrative in the process of aesthetic sense making. The painting's visual imagery reminds her of descriptive elements in the books, so she uses that narrative material in her interpretation.

Self-Reflective Stories

People reflect on their own experiences (Silverman 1995) and imaginatively appropriate the experiences of others in the process of interpreting art objects. Putting oneself "in the shoes" of the other, one is implicated in an interpretive process
whereby aspects of life—and one’s place in it—are made sensible. Self-reflection is commonly accomplished through comparing oneself with an actual other. But one often compares oneself with another version of oneself, a self at some temporal remove from the immediate present, whether of a recollected past or an imagined future. Such a narrative treatment of self-as-other constitutes a meeting of Mead’s (1934) two phases of the self, the “I” and the “me.”

Consider the following example: “I just sense that the figure is thinking and waiting... It’s hard to say. He’s waiting for morning, on the lookout for anyone that might come upon to see. Hard to tell how old the figure is.” The viewer justifies her assumptions about the figure in the painting by imaginatively interjecting herself into the scenario suggested by the painting, saying that she had had the same experience (of sitting in front of a fire): “And you watch the flames, and you just get quiet, and listen to any noises that are around in the air, and when you’re finished with your thoughts or you’re tired, and the fire goes down, you just go to sleep.” It is interesting that the viewer casts this reflection into the second person, as if to render the experience common to any listener (“you”), including herself.

Here is another self-reflective story:

The one with the cowboy boots and then—and then she has got the ankle brace-let, like it was in fashion at that time. Of course I was young then, I—but I was around, and I always wanted an ankle bracelet. I never had one, but it was very much in.

Pointing out the woman with the ankle bracelet in the painting, the viewer reflects on her own unfulfilled longing for such an ornament in her youth. This story demonstrates the evocative function of images with regard to viewers’ past experiences; memories that come to the fore as interpretive devices when making sense of artwork that imagistically triggers them.

The stories we observe among viewers of artwork illustrate the ubiquity and centrality of storytelling as a device employed in self-organization. Maines underscores the significance of storytelling as follows:

According to Mead (1934), a person is a self-reflexive organism that by a fairly early age has transformed its raw experiences into abstractions. Those transformations entail several complex processes that are not fully understood and over which considerable debate exists. Nevertheless, I propose that those transformations can be conceptualized in terms of narrative; that is, I propose that the self-abstracted person, so clearly seen in adulthood, is one who has acquired a biography and thereby can tell his or her life story. A person thus is defined as a self-narrating organism (Gergen and Gergen 1988; Polkinghorne 1991). (Maines 1993:23)

The present essay elaborates this theme, demonstrating the manner in which people fashion stories around one particular sort of object, works of art, in the composition of a life story, one that is always under expansion and revision.

In sum, interaction organized around paintings is characterized by three kinds of
talk: Evaluation, Attraction, and Storytelling. When making sense of paintings, people are either drawn into or make judgments about paintings as an initial step. Some people are drawn into a painting and then offer some assessment of it (e.g., "Okay, let's talk about this one, 'cause it's really eye catching"). Others evaluate the artwork and then are drawn into a painting—or are not drawn in at all and walk away from it (e.g., "This one with the woman, I just don't care for it"). However, favorable judgments regarding a painting (such as liking the color or subject matter) are not necessary preconditions for attraction. Being confused or repulsed by a painting can also lead to interest (e.g., "It's not very appealing to my eye, but it kinda fascinates me and draws me in with curiosity").

Provided that the viewer is sufficiently attracted to a painting, storytelling (of one of the three types just discussed) usually follows. The construction of a narrative with respect to a given painting represents (as it enacts) the viewer's ultimate effort in the aesthetic encounter.

**DESIGN FEATURES OF ART-TALK**

The three kinds of art talk just discussed are suggestive of two organizing principles that influence the interaction—and, we may suppose, the aesthetic experience—of viewers as they encounter paintings: Narration and Reification.

**Narration**

Telling stories organized around the paintings they encounter is among the most common and useful means by which people interpret works of art. Identifying the visual elements in a painting seems to be an initial step toward sense making. But disconnected elements alone do not create understanding. The viewer must bring these elements together into a coherent pattern if the artwork is to become meaningful.

As we suggested above, stories are compositions that combine distinct elements through establishing connections among phenomena and organize information into a coherent whole. Accessing ready-to-hand associations from their life experiences or fancy, people are able to project meaning beyond the sometimes negligible quantity of information provided in the artwork. One viewer's remark suggests a sensitivity to the paucity of information he must work with in interpreting paintings:

> It's like the artist gives you just enough clues and your mind fills out the rest. You can't see the rest of the horse, but you know it's there. You don't believe that it's a disembodied head; you believe the rest of the horse is in the painting even though you can't see it.

Traces of the viewer's prior experience are recollected when attempting to fill in the blanks in the painting. Knowing something of horse anatomy, the viewer is able to complete the picture and identify the image as a horse, even though only a
head is visible. This allows the viewer to make a claim that is absurd if taken in a literal sense, that “the rest of the horse is in the painting.” Such stories function to create a context within which artwork is made sensible.

Another important characteristic of aesthetic sense making is its retrospective character. Viewers start with an outcome (i.e., a painting) that was created some time ago and make sense of the outcome by creating a satisfying (or at least sufficient) story to account for the painting’s meaning. Storytelling enables viewers to cognize relations among (sometimes radically discontinuous) phenomena in works of art.

More broadly, the viewer of artwork orients herself to it as the teller of tales not merely about the art object but also about features of the wider world within which it and she appear. The encounter with a given painting provides a narrative occasion for the viewer to elaborate her understanding of this particular piece, art of this sort, art in general, the subject matter, of events in the world, herself in the world—indeed, of everything and anything at all. Viewers treat paintings as omnibus conversation pieces around which may be organized an indeterminate number and variety of stories whereby they come to terms with the world and themselves as characters in it.

Reification

Many people are attracted to certain paintings because they can recognize imagistic features and use these features as reference points for making sense of the artwork (e.g., “It grabs my eye . . . we’re dealing with real things that I can identify with and understand”). Viewers indicated that they liked realistic paintings because they can understand them (e.g., “As far as my tastes go, I usually like to have something with little form . . . like, you know, at least you can kind of tell what that is”). Abstract paintings, in failing to provide recognizable referents, leave viewers with a sense of uncertainty and are not, therefore, typically preferred (e.g., “Paintings in general like this, [I’m] just not a big fan of . . . it just blows my mind”).

There are some exceptions, of course. Some viewers indicated that they were drawn in precisely because of their felt uncertainty regarding the meaning of a painting, or that they liked a painting even though they did not understand it. Overall, however, people display a marked attraction to and preference for realistic paintings. One viewer expressed disappointment with a painting with the words, “It doesn’t seem real.” Another viewer’s interpretation was, “The window’s too much like a mirror. It is a window, but you see the reflection too clearly. You should be able to see what’s behind the window and you don’t see it.” Many viewers compare the images represented in paintings with how things actually appear in the “real world” and call attention to discontinuities between them.

Viewers do more than merely display a predilection for realism; they reify imagistic representations. In their interpretive interaction, viewers alternatively—or even concurrently—treat imagistic representations as if they were “real” or evaluate their quality in terms of their iconicity (i.e., the degree to which an image duplicates the visual experience of its real-world referent), as in the following example:
"It doesn’t take on any objects actually, like real . . . there’s somewhat of an animal, but it’s not really a real animal. There’s not really a real—any things that are like a true character or anything real. They are lies.” The viewer critiques the painting on the grounds that it fails to represent real objects. More than this, the viewer makes a sort of moralistic pronouncement regarding the images as falsehoods.

This discursive comparison of things in the world (visual phenomena serving as models for the artist’s craft) with painted imagery (another sort of visual phenomena but the product of artifice) facilitates and enacts the viewer’s experience of identification and differentiation on at least two levels: (1) the recognition of similarity (or otherwise) between the representation and its referent and (2) the formation of an aesthetic judgment that implicates and informs the disposition of the viewer vis-à-vis the representation. Viewers usually spoke of representations assessed as high in iconicity as if they were their referents and, at the same time, evaluated them favorably. On the other hand, those representations that were otherwise assessed were, at once, spoken of as the product of artistic (even if unskillful) effort and inauspiciously appraised. In other words, viewers encountering more realistic representations spoke of them, not as representations, but as the very real-world referents themselves. They behaved toward iconic objects on the basis of a discursively embodied understanding that does not differentiate between the real and its representation. The reader may recall the promiscuous nature of viewers’ storytelling as organized around images; such narrative flights are anchored in the treatment of imagistic elements in much the same way that they might speak of real-world happenings.

Viewers’ (visual, aesthetic) experience of identity between representation and referent appears, therefore, to correlate both with the indiscriminate manner with which they verbally represent images and their real-world counterparts, and with a positive predisposition to those images. In a sense, an identity relation occurs across several levels: between art and model, between talk about images and reality, and between one’s “tastes” and the work of art. Perhaps it is not too far a stretch to suggest that this identity relation obtains even between the work of art and the viewer: one’s sense of oneself—at least, its aesthetic component—is reflexively constructed in the face of art that is taken to felicitously portray reality. Viewers’ talk about works of (highly iconic) art in many respects sounds like talk about real things; they ignore the depictive, artificial nature of the work and instead treat it as transparent to the real.

Hearkening back to Mead (1934), it may be that the viewer is fashioning a self vis-à-vis the artwork-as-other in and through the discursive activity of aesthetic sense making. As Silverman has observed:

In every realm of activity, we seek and make opportunities to create, express, and affirm who we believe ourselves to be—our sense of self. . . . [O]ne’s sense of self and the desire to affirm and express it contribute greatly to the aspects of meaning that are activated in response to objects and exhibits. (1995:162)

Viewers take stands—they position themselves—in the face of the artwork they interpret. The viewer assumes a perspective in the aesthetic encounter that implicates
her own identity as a particular sort of subject in a historically irreproducible moment of relation to this painting.

Moreover, because art interpretation is often done in the company of others, the typical viewer’s experience is not merely that of a single subject interacting with an object but of two (or more) subjects discursively reckoning with that object. Hence, the inherently interactive quality of aesthetic experience assumes a manifestly intersubjective character in its prototypical form, as viewers cooperate in the mutual formation of their self-sense through art talk.

This suggests that people use artwork to facilitate social relations of whatever kind, whether affiliative or dissociative. Interpreting Mead, Harris and Sandresky (1985:292) propose that

Mead (1982:100) argues that the “social function of the artist is to provide imagery for thinking from all points of view.” The community demands this of the artist. Through art and drama, members of society learn how to deal with new social situations by setting up types. Thus social relations are tried through art.

. . . where you bring in new social goods, the great problem is that of realizing completely the human nature of the individual cut off; the great need for imagery to present them to us. The drama and novel do this, make these people talk to us and we to them. (Mead 1982:100–101)

In many specific cases, the content of a given work of art may provide a “type” of the other, with which one may identify (or otherwise) to some degree. More generally, in making aesthetic judgments, viewers of artwork position themselves with respect to all real or hypothetical fellow viewers in terms of the relative similarity of their respective evaluations—whether of a particular piece or a whole genre.

**CONCLUSION**

Aesthetic interaction is an instantiation of the human sense-making effort when encountering works of art. Viewers’ interpretive ventures are discursive accomplishments, means by which the aesthetic dimension of life is integrated into the overall life experience. By engaging in conversation about paintings—that is, verbalizing the visual experience—images become meaningful objects for viewers. In the process of sense making, paintings are not treated as detached, indifferent objects but elicit personal—often powerful—responses from viewers. Art becomes meaningful, not merely in the sense of identifying what a given image represents, but through the viewer’s identification (or otherwise) with it.

People fashion themselves in the moment of relating to any and every object. But some objects elicit more profound, and personally self-implicative, responses than others. Art’s unique capacity to make (many of) us feel accounts for its relatively great potential as an object of reflexive (i.e., self-constitutive) consciousness.

In this study we have distinguished three categories of talk organized around paintings: Evaluation, Attraction, and Storytelling. Such forms of interaction are routinely and recurrently available to viewers as interpretive devices when in the
presence of artwork and assist them in their efforts to appreciate art's significance for themselves and others.

In our analysis of that signification process, two design features of interaction employed therein were identified: Narration and Reification. For the viewers whose talk we studied, storytelling facilitates the integration of aesthetic and everyday life experience in one and the same sense-making process. Viewers methodically reproduce stories in their (sometimes challenging) struggle to discover the significance of art.

Such stories (together with less thematic talk) commonly feature a disposition to treat imagistic elements of art as if they were not representations but the referents themselves. The prevalence of the reifying function in viewers' talk suggests a kind of wholesale suspension of critical differentiation between images-as-objects and real-world objects, as if while operating within the experiential framework of aesthetics a different reality standard than that employed elsewhere were in force. A kind of "fuzzy logic"—more promiscuous, more inclusive—seems to dominate the consciousness of art viewers. Perhaps this is a by-product of the very expansiveness of artistic license; anything can happen in art, after all.

We have seen that art viewership is a social process. Through interactively sharing their own experiences, competencies, and judgments, viewers express and construct aspects of themselves and others. This is certainly no less true in aesthetic experience than elsewhere. Viewers verbalize their experience of artwork in order to disclose its meaning to themselves and others. In so doing, they afford themselves meaning—and, perhaps, a sense of the meaningful—that is not otherwise available. Art talk may, therefore, be understood as a social institution by which we viewers explore and engage in that most fundamental of all artifices: ourselves.

REFERENCES


