

# Decontextualisation of the Art Object

## Making Nothing Out Of Something

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### Introduction

'Theory is good, but it doesn't prevent things from existing.'  
(Charcot, J. M. quoted in Freud, S. 1977 p156)

Decontextualisation is a term I have been using in my work to describe what happens to an artwork when its context or value has been removed or transferred to another non-art object. The purpose of this is to demonstrate a possible way that value is created and communicated.

My aim in using decontextualisation is to create something that bears no relation to anything. I wish to create an artwork that is aware of its cultural, visual and psychological standing and uses this awareness to negate all attempts at clarifying, classifying and identifying its origin, use and value. I have currently only made tentative steps towards producing this work and through this I have come to realise the complexity and practical impossibilities of the idea. What I will illustrate here are the processes and methods by which I can allude to this process through metaphor, analogy and psychological suggestion, and why I feel this is an interesting field to explore.

### Context in Art

Imagine something without context. Is it possible? How would we know what a thing is without the ability to compare it to something else? Without context we cannot make value judgements. What is big without small? What is red without blue? Good is only better because it exists concurrently with bad.

For art, context delivers a wide source of information that enables us to make judgements about a work. 'Not as good as Hirst' perhaps? Or 'better than Renoir.' What I want to do is remove this Saussurian process from the equation of value judgement.

We are all familiar with the process of likening something to something else - we see something new and the first thing we do, quite automatically, is think of what it reminds us of. This is a natural response; it enables us to make sense of what we are looking at.

'These characteristics are a set of degenerate neural circuits making up a diverse repertoire, a means of changing the synaptic populations upon receiving various input signals, and a set of value constraints that increase the likelihood of repetition of an adaptive or rewarding output regardless of which degenerate circuit is used... Selection occurs at the level of synapses through alteration of their efficacy or strengths. Which particular synapses are altered depends on previous experience, as well as on the combined activities of the ascending value systems...'  
(Edelman, G. M. and Tononi, G. 2000 p97)

All these responses trigger a process of recollection as we search our memory, quite subconsciously, for a match to the thing we are looking at. This does not only mean the physicality of the object; we also search for emotional triggers. How does the object make us feel? Does it make us feel the same way as something else we have seen or experienced?

This initial response allows us to create our primary value judgement. Do we like the things that the object reminds us of?

'We are meaning-seeking creatures. Biologically, our nervous systems are organised in such a way that the brain automatically clusters incoming stimuli into configurations. Meaning also provides a sense of mastery: feeling helpless and confused in the face of random, unpatterned events, we seek to order them and, in so doing, gain a sense of control over them. Even more important, meaning gives birth to values...'  
(Dr Yalom, I. D. 1991 p12)

Art is also a product of context. That is to say, it is a product of a person's reaction to the stimuli around him/her. These stimuli take the form of everything that the senses deliver to the consciousness and those that arouse the subconscious or spark a memory. This person then becomes the artist when they translate these sensory inputs into a physical output. This is the primary context, the context in which the work was initially made. This primary context is what gives the work its initial value. For example: a work painted in a modernist style at the beginning of the modernist movement could be considered more important/original/valuable than a modernist style work painted in the 1990s (There is another level that this can be taken to - that of the ironic, self-referential and the Post-modern - this will be addressed later). The perception of art could be said to consist of a series of contextual signifiers that vary according to the individual:

- The person's knowledge of the artist (history etc...)
- The person's knowledge of the work (when created, conditions under which created, other representations of the work, reviews.)
- The situation in which the person views the work (solo show, group show, private view, exhibition, private collection, reproduction.)

The viewer's knowledge of the artist greatly affects their perceived understanding of the meaning of the work. Having witnessed the artist's work before, read about the artist's life and witnessed other published or televised reasons behind the artist's working methods all go towards informing the viewer of recognised ways of understanding the artwork.

A person with little or no knowledge of the artist approaches the work clean, possibly expecting the work to speak to them, to give up its meanings. Often the not knowing of the meaning can confuse the viewer. He/she takes comfort in being able to understand the work and, as is our nature, we may fear or dislike what we do not understand.

As with knowledge of the artist, knowledge of the artwork itself also affects the understanding of its meanings. The viewer may have seen other representations of the work (photographic reproductions in books, magazines, newspapers and on television) that influence how they expect to perceive it. They may prefer the second-hand version to the real thing?

The viewer may know when the work was created and under what circumstances (what was happening at the time in the art world and the world in general). This

information can be used to justify certain characteristics of the piece.

The situation in which the person views the work informs them of its assumed status. Is it in a large or prestigious gallery, or is it in the basement of a shoestring arts organisation run by volunteers? Either way these situations have their own values that the viewer may have an opinion of; the viewer may only consider the large or prestigious gallery as a place where good art can be found, or he/she may crave the unknown, underground, alternative, non-mainstream art spaces. Of course the viewer may be able to make his/her own judgement of the work itself regardless of the situation it is presented in. However this is a powerful and influential context. By combining these three aspects the viewer is able to build a response to the artwork.

These contexts can also be contrived. A person can be given false or misleading information about the history of the work or the artist. The artist themselves may create a (not entirely untrue) origin for the creation or development of ideas.

'In this context, one might mention Michelangelo selling his famous Cupid as an antique, or Pier Maria da Pescia burying his own works and arranging for them to be dug up before the eyes of Charles VIII when he made his entry into Rome.'

(Kris, E. and Kurz, O. 1979 p97)

Our current media-savvy generation is mostly aware of the tricks that can be played by people in order to get themselves noticed. However, these tricks are often as successful when blatantly obvious as when perfectly hidden.

Falsifying documentation, bending the truth and embellishing facts are all, to varying degrees, ways of creating a context for an object, event or person. Much of the art known as Post-modern utilises these ideas, piling context upon context and making references to other artworks, artists and histories in order to justify its own existence by setting itself firmly in the context of 'artwork'.

These methods can be used not only to create a context; they can also be used to remove it, as we shall see in the next section.

## **Decontextualisation**

As mentioned in the introduction, I am using decontextualisation as a way of creating something that bears no relation to anything - that cannot be compared. I find this an interesting challenge as I believe it sheds enormous light on the processes that create meaning and value in artworks via a kind of reverse-psychology for reading visual signs. By showing you where there is no art (or where the art has been removed) you become more attuned to perceiving it when it is there, your senses become heightened.

I am currently experimenting with three types of decontextualisation. They are as follows:

- Transference.
- Shifted perception.
- Complete decontextualisation.

Transference occurs when the context or value of an artwork is removed and transferred to another object or documentation about the artwork. An example of this would be my work *Counterwork* (1998). This work took the form of a book that contains some texts and seven stills taken from a video monitor. The book claims

that the images are from an exciting performance piece that was performed only once, and the videotape has since been lost or destroyed. In actual fact I created the images by posing in front of a video camera with various props. Afterwards I took some photographs from the monitor and destroyed the tape. I then selected images and bound them into a book with accompanying texts that vaguely allude to a performance but do not really describe what happened. The intention of this work was to provoke the reader to fill in the blanks between the images. No record of the movements exists so the viewer creates their own performance. The book and its images have now become the vessel for the implied value of the performance. I have removed the performance itself and its context has been transferred to the book. This work also presents a paradox in that I did, in some sense, perform, and the resulting book does document this action, but only through half-truths. The tape of the performance was destroyed. The text, though inaccurate about circumstances surrounding the performance, doesn't lie about what happened, but only because it does not actually describe anything directly. By being sparse with facts and using the reassuring medium of the book I hoped to recreate the performance (as far as the reader of the book is concerned) as an important and unattainable event. Transference was used as a method of disguise. In this case recontextualisation might be a more appropriate term. I have included it here as I feel that the psychological processes are the same and that decontextualisation is the umbrella term for these processes.

Shifted perception is the act of causing the viewer to believe in a visual representation that depicts an altered or manipulated view of the space that they are in. This method is used more as a way of visualising the process of decontextualisation as an artistic action than actual decontextualisation itself. I have been experimenting with this method in the Singularities series of works (1997-present). These works are installations of digitally manipulated images of a given exhibition space. They are sometimes accompanied by a sculptural work. In the image there will be an alteration to a view through a window, door or other suitable framing device that occurs in the space. The sculptural intervention will also take place in the same doorway, window etc... Now three variations exist of the perceived view of the exhibition space: the original view, the physically altered view (sculptural intervention) and the digitally altered view. My intention with these works is to highlight to the viewer the possibility of being able to witness more than one reality of a specific space simultaneously; this being an analogy for the possibility of reading multiple meanings from an artwork. The original space is the unaffected environment, the sculptural intervention represents the physical act of creating art and the digitally manipulated image represents the intended shift in perception that the artist wishes to create through the artwork. From my sketchbook during the installation of Dislocation at the Islington Arts Factory (2002):

'The space within a space. The installation is a representation of the change that can be brought about by the artist. This is a change of perception (and therefore value) of a given reality. The artist has dislocated time and space psychologically. The photographs represent the desired result, the installation represents the energy used to achieve the desired result. Thus the viewer is able to witness the activity, the result and the energy for themselves by combining the visual material mentally.'

Complete decontextualisation is the removal of all contextual information from the

art object. I currently feel that this is probably impossible to achieve. As mentioned above, the human mind (when presented with a stimulus) begins the process of recognition. We are very good at spotting shapes in things; think of animals in clouds or faces in formations of rock, for example. My intention with complete decontextualisation is to reach a point where a person is completely unable to describe the art object I have made using such analogies and similes. They simply cannot say what the object looks like.

To make this possible I would have to be able to remove all signifiers from the object. All information would have to be uninspiring, unremarkable or forgettable. Or rather, each person, when witnessing the work, would have to be psychologically affected by it; the visual properties of the work negating all value signifiers. The viewer is then unable to recognise any part of object. Without recognition the viewer has no basis in which to form an opinion of the work; it looks unlike anything they have ever seen. How can they compare it to a Hirst or a Renoir if it has no comparable quality?

A way I believe that an object could become decontextualised, and this is where we must take quite a large psychological leap, is through time-travel. This would, theoretically, allow the object to be present in the same state at different times. The implications of this are, I feel, that the object would lose its meaning; to exist in more than one time at the same time removes any defining characteristic of the object - it cannot be compared to other things because it has no singular state - or rather, its singular state occurs in multiple times.

Time-travel is, at present, thought to be impossible. What I propose to do is allude to time-travel through art-making. A small number of works already mention this: False Parallels and Diagram of a Time-machine as examples. The purpose of this is to provoke the viewer into thinking about why I have used the idea of time-travel and set them on a path of thought about the problems, paradoxes and popular ideas about the process. Then follow up with more works that expand further upon the theme of decontextualisation whilst using ideas of time-travel. Of course there is the question of whether an object that is without context actually has an artistic value? If all context (and therefore value) has been removed, is it an artwork? I would argue that in this case yes, as it is the artist's intention that the artwork has no artistic value and there are artistic purposes behind the removal. What it has instead is an antivalue, a negative value that, rather than sending out information about its meanings, sucks them all in like an artistic black hole.

'Black holes are regions where the gravitational field of matter is too strong for anything, even light, to escape from its grasp. In Einstein's picture of curved space, the concentration of mass within a small region can grow so great that the geometry curves dramatically and pinches off the region surrounding it, preventing any signals getting out'

(Barrow, J. D. 2000 p238)

What I want to create (within the realms of possibility) is an artwork that alludes to this process. Not by building a pretend black hole or any other literal interpretation. I want to produce a work that deliberately and artistically does not give anything away, doesn't reveal its place in history, its creation methods, its use, purpose or meaning. No signals get out.



## **Concluding with the Impossible: The Decontextualised Artwork**

This (at present) imaginary artwork is, as mentioned earlier, seemingly impossible to achieve directly. Works that allude to the theories presented here will probably never achieve complete decontextualisation as we are 'meaning-seeking creatures' (Dr Yalom) and quite unable to disengage our ability to see familiar shapes and patterns in new stimuli.

To create the artwork that does not give anything away I would have to break the laws of physics and create an artistic black hole. The Singularity series of works, as their title suggests, allude to this idea of a point of convergence in space-time. What I hope to do is create works that encourage the viewer to think in such a way that they begin to look for the antivalue and are willing to give rather than take from the artwork.

I do not want to have to make a long preamble before the artwork in order to precondition the viewer; the work should do this itself. What I imagine at present is an object of either such blankness or utter complication that it is impossible to begin to dissect its purpose both as an artwork and as an everyday object. If all resemblance of everyday objects is removed from the artwork there would be no start-point for forming an idea as to its use and therefore no way of divining a possible motive for its creation.

Maybe the problem lies in the fact that I perceive this artwork to be an object? Perhaps I will have to create or find a new way of presenting the work, even the idea of the work, in order to provoke the response I require. The Singularity pieces were an attempt to coax the viewer into imagining the possibilities of the environment they were in by creating an extra dimension to the reality of the piece. Counterwork required the reader to reconstruct the events of the alleged performance; thus each reader creates their own unique version of the performance psychologically. These works progress some way into the realms of a psychologically existing artwork where it is the interaction of the viewer and their unique imagining of the work that completes the creative process.

Recent digital artworks I have made exist (or are created to be witnessed) entirely online. Much of this work is concerned with (a) the possibilities of creating a feeling of value from a medium that is intangible, and (b) raising the question of originality within the medium, i.e. with an online artwork, where does the original reside, and is an original necessary? I am interested in the parallels between a psychologically constructed artwork and a digital one. Both exist in a state that is intangible and have to be contained by a storage system (computer or human memory). The work is information that only makes sense when interpreted by a display device or through the physical act of making. It is the physical presence of an artwork that informs our contextual judgement; as mentioned earlier: its primary context, where we see it, when we see it and what we may already know about it. Perhaps it is impossible for the decontextualised artwork to be a physical thing? Perhaps it will be reduced to such a degree that it becomes unintelligible data, an unfinished thought.

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