

University of Arizona, Kobus Barnard
Pictorial Space
Sheila Butler, October 12, 2012

Your Professor introduced me to Envisioning Information by Edward R. Tufte, who taught courses in statistical information at Yale University. Tufte supports the scientific validity of statistical research but he is very critical of the diagrams and graphics that scientists employ to visualize various forms of statistical data. He suggests that the field of visual art offers insights that may be valuable to scientists.

Professor Barnard has invited me to answer the question: What is visual art? within the limits of your 50 minute class time.

As a form of knowledge, visual art is cross-disciplinary. For example, the best art commentary I've heard recently was on the NFL pre-game commentary, the Monday Night Countdown, a few weeks ago. They presented a tribute to Steve Sabol, the longstanding official NFL documentary filmmaker who just passed away. The tribute included a clip by Sabol himself, an interview in which he identified himself, not as a sports commentator, but instead he identified himself as an artist. He said that his film work for the NFL is intended "To give a new understanding to something that has already been seen – to offer a creative view of reality."

(Kobus: Due to time constraints, I eliminated the following paragraph, but these comments are part of the whole territory.)

Due to my time limit today, I will have to limit my talk to remarks about the European art heritage that we live with here in North America. But if I had more time, I would expand this view of art theory and practice to consider the world's other great civilizations: the long history of art and philosophy in the Arab world - the long history of art and philosophy in China and India and Africa. Although there are mutual fundamental concerns that join all cultures in the field of visual art, answers to the question: "What is visual art?" do differ somewhat from culture to culture because no one group can cover all the many options - Arab history, Chinese history, Indian history, the histories of aboriginal peoples, offer legitimate and ancient ideas about art and they are different, not worse and not better, but Different from our Western Civilization in terms of ideas about works of art. So far as we know, all human beings, everywhere on earth, have made art of some kind.

Art changes over time, and the changes are not random - each period of art history has its own definition of the word "art" and so this definition changes as time passes.

When you are trying to think about how art changes over time – think about it this way: each time period constructs its own answers to three fundamental questions:
1) what is art?

- 2) once we have agreed that something is a work of art, how do we decide if it's good art or bad art?
- 3) who gets to call him or her self an artist?
for example, in our own historical European tradition, Michelangelo in 16th century Italy had one set of answers to these questions - Vincent Van Gogh in the 19th century had another set of answers - and Jackson Pollock in the 20th century had other answers.

When changes happen in the course of art history, there must be changes in both theory and practice. What do we mean by the terms "theory and practice"? – mental concept and physical construction.

At some times in visual art history, when change happens, theory drives practice and at other times practice drives theory.

A practicing artist needs to know about the mainstream of the time in history that he/she was born into, but the artist isn't limited to that particular form of expression – it is possible to create change.

We can also ask: In our European-based art history, what actual practices can an artist undertake?

sculpture (close to the spatial reality of the real world –3-dimensional volume)

painting/drawing and photographic processes (more abstract, space is an illusion)

drama (theatre)

dance

architecture

music (not visual and this is important – in 1877 an English art commentator made the statement “All art constantly aspires to the condition of music” – remember this and we'll return to it later). (Kobus: again, I omitted this point about music because of time, but it's interesting).

But in the course of our history of Western Civilization, the central theories of Visual Art have been worked out in the field of painting, the making of pictures. Edward R. Tufte in his book Envisioning Information agrees with this statement. In chapter one, he focuses on “Escaping Flatland”.

Let's look at the most fundamental fact about the formal properties of pictures. Paintings and drawings represent a fundamental contradiction in that artists must attempt to represent a three-dimensional world on a two dimensional surface. The world has space, but the painting/drawing surface is flat. When you think of it, it seems like an impossible or a ridiculous task. And although we are talking today about painting/drawing, it's important to consider that this fundamental contradiction is true of photographs, movies and video art (TV), digital screens of all kinds, as well.

So drawing/painting always requires some form of spatial translation. The artist can use formal art techniques to warp our perception of the flat surface, to make the picture appear to have depth,

OR the artist can warp our visual perceptions of the world around us in order to preserve our perception of the flat quality of the picture surface.

Thus in this sense every picture is an abstraction. It is a way of making some accommodation between the real space of the world and the two-dimensional space of the paper or canvas. In aesthetic terms neither approach is innately better than the other. Either approach can produce beautiful art, or bad art.

So three-dimensional space in pictures is never real in the sense that depth and distances in the world are real, but pictorial space can be convincingly illusionistic, conveying a model of the way the real world looks when we move through it.
images 1,2,3

If we look at the history of pictorial space in the European tradition that we have inherited, we find a growing preference in 15th century Italy for pictures that looked illusionistically spatial. Italian artists gradually developed linear perspective, as a way to represent three-dimensional forms on a flat surface. Linear perspective depends on changes of scale, and on the fact that parallel straight lines and edges appear to eye and brain to converge as they recede in space.
images 4,5,6,7

For several hundred years paintings and drawings with a strong illusion of space continued to be preferred in our culture. Then at the end of the nineteenth century a revolution in terms of pictorial space began to take precedence. It rose from a widespread artistic concern focusing on the nature of material reality. Was the illusion of three-dimensional space that painters emphasized as the chief concern for art really more significant than the factual two-dimensional material reality of the painting surface, (the canvas, the wall or the paper)?
image 8

The invention of linear perspective took place at a time when spiritual faith was the driving force of art and civilization, but the 19th and 20th centuries saw an emphasis on the investigation of the world by science and art by means of rational thought. For artists this meant a new look at pictures, a move toward an investigation of the language of painting itself at the expense of descriptive subject matter.
images 9,10,11

Artists began to make pictures in which a different version of pictorial space privileges the beauty of the two-dimensional surface as a real part of the real world. Paintings were no longer intended to represent landscapes, or people or other subjects in the world (subject matter) as the primary reality; instead paintings were created as material “objects in a world of objects”. At this time in our history, North America artists displaced Europe as the theoretical leaders, creating the respected models for art.
images 12,13

Colour, texture, line quality, shape patterns were seen to have expressive powers without needing to refer to specific subjects in the world. Even in the 19th century artists thought about the fact that colour, for example, conveys emotion even without any connection to subject matter, but it wasn't until the mid-20th century that painters renounced subject matter and worked with formal properties alone.

So twentieth century painting/drawing moved strongly toward the revelation of the flat picture surface – today many artists still prefer to preserve the factual presence of the two-dimensional plane as a prominent aesthetic feature of most contemporary paintings and drawings – but artists now feel free to mix and match in the process of pictorial creation, in which pictures include spatial illusion and the appreciation of the flat plane.

Following this intensive theoretical examination of pictorial space, the last 30 years toward the end of the 20th century and continuing up to the present again becomes an example of a time in history when theory begins to change practice. Think back to the three theoretical questions at the beginning of my talk: the third question that each culture must answer: “Who gets to call him or her self an artist?” During the 20th century, many disadvantaged artists began to question why all the "geniuses" in Western civilization turned out to be straight white men. Art creation became politicized.

Artists, critics, art historians began to critique and examine the history and philosophy of art that formed the ideas and body of work that North America had inherited from Europe. They began to challenge all the "truths" about art that were fundamental to Western Civilization. This theoretical challenge was politically motivated by the people who were to a large extent left out of the mainstream: women, gay men and lesbian women, people of colour and aboriginal people. These artists again chose to represent subject matter drawn from the real world.

images 14,15,16

So identity becomes a primary issue for art. Writers and artists consciously began to avoid the term "identity" and to use the term "self" instead to indicate that they were thinking differently about the place of the individual in relation to society - about redefinitions of the artist's identity.

New art accompanied new theories:

- 1) Collectives and collaborative endeavours in visual arts (not the single genius)
- 2) Mixed media (dissolving boundaries between disciplines) and new technological media for art, issues of access and presentation, art as information, abandoning traditional standards of craftsmanship
- 3) Cultural equity and diversity, political activism by First Nations Canadians and black and Asian artists
- 4) Alternatives to the heterosexual mainstream, other representations of the human body

5) Feminist art production and criticism, interventions into existing systems

This introductory summary brings us up to the present, and also to the end of our 50 minutes. My summary of how artists have escaped flatland in their creative and expressive pictorial space is what Edward R. Tufte refers to in his critique. In his first paragraph, chapter one, he writes, “Even though we navigate daily through a perceptual world of three spatial dimensions and reason occasionally about higher dimensional arenas with mathematical ease, the world portrayed on our information displays is caught up in the two dimensionality of the endless flatlands of paper and video screen. ... Escaping this flatland is the essential task of envisioning information ...”. Visual artists are still working on this. Thank you for your time and attention.