

Can't Hear My Eyes Material as Information

By Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk

One often hears in art circles, that is about art as an unsurpassed form of communication and understanding, a maker of new imaginaries and sensibilities. In a moment of clarity, you might think: "Sincerely, how are they talking let alone understanding and about what, really?" They being the work of art and the other species capable of thinking such means of connectivity (human). "Am I missing certain primordial (or rather learned) characteristics and sensibilities that avoid me from establishing contact and a sense of mutual understanding between the work of art and myself?" Indeed, it seems there is a lot of talking about talking, and a lot of talking about artworks among individuals, exclusive of the artwork proper, either present or absent. The rendering of the work's image forms a springboard that will suffice for another conversation. That meaning: to think about something, one has to think about something else. Artworks have great potential for that. However, to speak in a direct sense, structurally: to have an encounter with a work of art by means of mutual transmission and reception seems to be a rarity, and more likely, an impossibility.

Can't Hear My Eyes shows a number of works with sculptural and painterly connotations, dimensions and properties: to evoke their seemingly static nature and surface in light of the work's inherent and consequently invisible and not directly sensible dynamics, through the format of an exhibition, in two given spaces. It does so in order to test the potential of the work of art in the key of current tendencies within our information culture. The given fact that we have grown more and more accustomed to hard facts as based on transparent, ascertainable ('checkable') and 'democratic' sources of information and modes of communication; and the surge for clear cut definitions to indicate the parts that surround us, has lead to, one could argue, an incongruity between works of art and the way we generally organise and conceive of our lives. In that, our time pressured culture of high performance gives rise to a two-fold (and presumably manifold) problematic: a lack of dedicated time to engage oneself with art, and perhaps more importantly, an expectancy of visual art to function within and be responsive to the demands that take shape within our information culture: functional, serving and practical support structures and texts to increase fluid and continuous communication and understanding, to increase efficiency, productivity, and so forth.

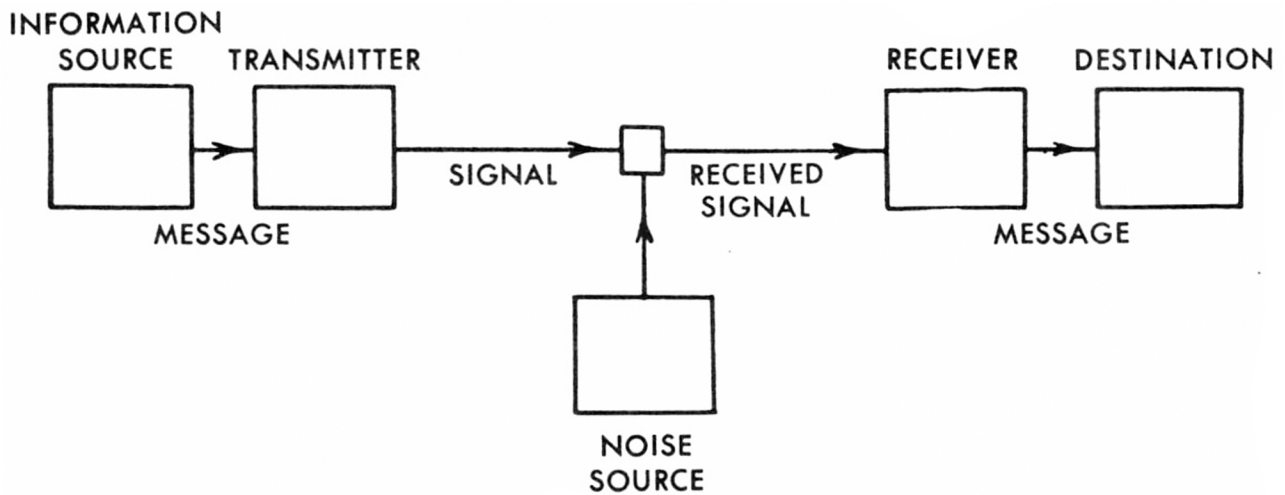


Fig.1: Schematic diagram of a general communication system as based on the theory of C.E. Shannon

As foregrounded by the first paragraph, a work of art is generally understood outside of these networks of communication. Fact is, the ‘open circuits’ works of art put forward through their presence, are by no means reciprocal, per definition: any encounter with a work of art, by an individual or a group of people, is based on the act of an unconscious and involuntary (albeit intentional) giving of the artwork and the ambiguously so conscious and voluntary taking by the viewer (in that, interactive and more performative works of art avoid an equivalent exchange through their scripting). Generous as this may seem, and is, the crux of the issue remains with the idea that we should not seek the relevance and potential of art within the framework of mutuality, responsiveness and meaningfulness as seen from the position of the artwork alone. In so doing, the exhibition seeks to (re)negotiate and (re)position the viewer’s possibility and potentiality through what sensible parts can be distributed, circulated and start to resonate by means of the presence of the artworks, their material qualities and speculative potential. The renegotiation and repositioning of the viewer is based on a confrontation of the idea that a work of art is a means in and by itself, a means to an end. Instant effect. As imposed by the title *Can’t Hear My Eyes*¹, the impossibility of complete empirical, sensory and mental understanding even if the works start to hinge on their translation into accompanying texts will find its recovery in the uselessness of trying to do so. Moreover, this is the point at which a work of art can posit an unsurpassed form of understanding: by means of the viewer’s willingness to overcome the limitations of separating sense from non-sense, to allow understanding by misunderstanding... It is constantly becoming communication, but never quite arriving.

An interesting consideration in positioning ourselves as perceivers of works of art is presented to us by Anthony Huberman: “A work of art establishes a state of potentiality, challenging us to change or readjust the way we understand the world. Faced with an object or image we don’t understand, we seek an explanation within our existing epistemological map. When none emerges, we then turn the map itself – our own consciousness – and begin to examine our own assumptions and to question the preconceived notions upon which they are built. Slowly, we consider unlearning part of our knowledge and reshuffle some of its pieces. Slightly redrawn, our map might then provide a clearer place for the art object and allow us to appreciate and understand it better. As an agent that can demand and effect this shift in perception, awareness, and consciousness, art can be a powerful political force.”²

In other, more abstract words: in his book *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière outlines a system which he refers to as ‘the distribution of the sensible’. This distribution is composed of the *a priori* laws which condition what is possible to see and hear, to say and think, to do and make. In essence, the distribution of the sensible is the conditions of possibility for perception, thought, and activity, what is apprehensible by the senses. Rancière partitions the distribution of the sensible into various regimes, which subsequently delimit forms of inclusion and exclusion in a community. To transform the distribution of the sensible, these partitions must be transformed as well. The liberation of the senses does not occur simply with the lifting of social barriers and exclusions, the senses must be educated if they are to be extended.³

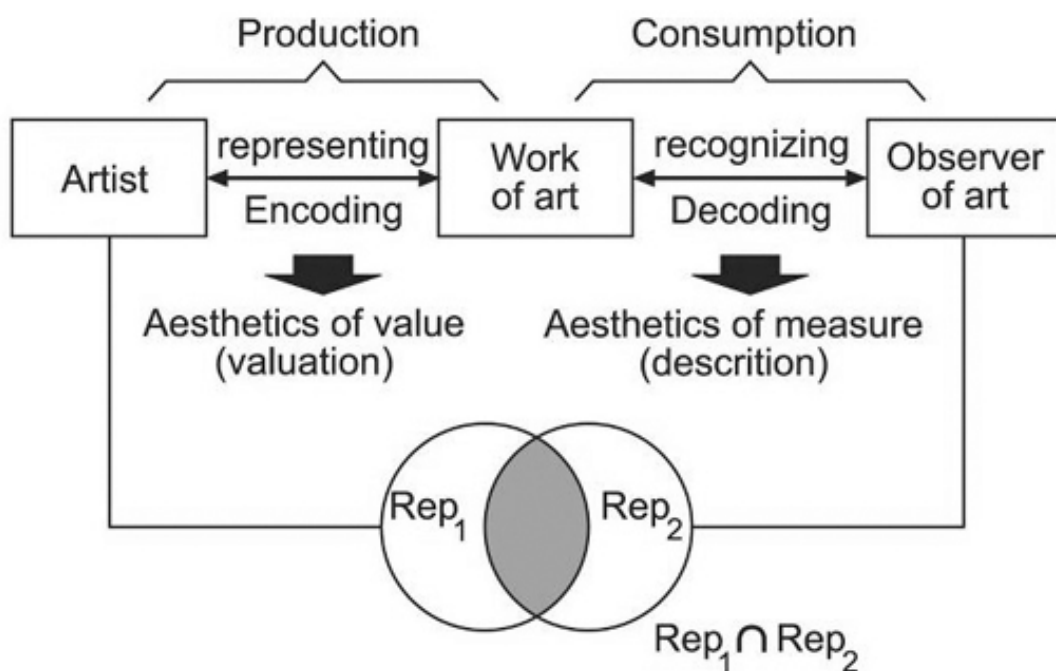


Fig.2: Schematic diagram of a communication system of art as based on the theory of M. Bense in *Einführung in die informationstheoretische Ästhetik*, Rowohlt, Hamburg, 1969.

In response to the latter two fragments, the exhibition *Can't Hear My Eyes* proposes to assess the viewer's – the witness and perceiver of the event: the space, the exhibition, the artworks – position by foregrounding the potentiality of perception and the distribution of the sensible by means of 'showing, not telling'. In so doing, it avoids didactic and explanatory devices in order to emphasize, and hopefully stimulate modes of perception and awareness for the artworks' surfaces, tactility, their material qualities and characteristics, and moreover to think the inherent processes of application, the mental and physical application of the possibilities and languages of painting and sculptural elements as allocated to physicalities; the performative and dynamic parts that have become part of the works by preceding actions and that are evoked through the act of making.

Ultimately, the exhibition implies a certain movement – albeit its seeming tranquility and delay – towards an understanding of material as information: it is an invitation to engage in a close reading of surfaces, of speaking through volumes and images rather than 'know what' (facts). In that, as one might sense at this point, the exhibition is not structured around a specific theme, but is rather an analogy of artistic approaches and practices in which the artworks shape the exhibition through internal self-organisation, the process mostly coming from the artworks and the spaces themselves.

1. The title of the exhibition is based on a song with the same title by Ariel Pink.

2. Anthony Huberman, publication accompanying the exhibition *For the blind man in the dark room looking for the black cat that isn't there*, Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis / Culturgest, Lisbon, 2009, pp. 89-90.

3. Jacques Rancière, *The Distribution of the Sensible* in: *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Continuum, 2006, pp. 7-47.