

ARTISTS AND THE PUBLIC'S ATTENTION SINCE THE 1960S: AN EXPLORATION OF HOW ARTISTS SEEK TO CAPTURE THE AUDIENCE'S ATTENTION

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ABSTRACT

Art historical research shows that artists, especially since the 1960s rise in museum and art gallery attendance do not always trust the audience's ability to deal with their art. The choice for a performative aesthetic, for example, has also been a method for reasserting rather than—as is often thought—relinquishing artistic control. The article looks at aesthetic strategies developed by artists who desire(d) a more attentive look from their audiences. It considers works made by artists in the sixties and seventies. It is a fact that the appearance of mass audiences goes hand in hand with the creation of artworks that have “attention” as their subject. Secondly, the article takes a look at more contemporary work. Faced with spectators that spend about 28 seconds looking at artworks and reading the accompanying labels, artists are developing strategies that slow spectators down, thus hoping to channel and hold their attention.

KEYWORDS

Mass Audience, Attention, Performativity, Contemporary Art

In 1964, American artist Allan Kaprow asked how artists could effectively position their art in “the contemporary department-store milieu.”¹ The audience, he observed, was now a large group comprised of “readers of the weeklies, viewers of television, charitable organisations, political campaigners, schools and universities, collectors, and the average person.”² The desire to encounter art seemed to be artificially created. He wrote: “Aunt May and Uncle Jim do not always fit the philistine costume history has assigned them. Attracted to art by its promotion in mass media, they come to an artist enthusiastically but with little grasp of what that artist is doing.”³ The media “explosion” in the United States in the 1960s had an impact on society. Rapid technological developments in electronic and print media brought people in contact with a common pool of ideas and images. The uniformization of information shaped people’s perception of reality.⁴ It clearly colors Kaprow’s perception of the audience. Rather than seeing it as a group of philistines, he thought of it as being dis- or ill-informed by the penetrating media culture. In Europe, the situation was no different as Guy Debord’s manifest *Society of the Spectacle*, written in 1967, suggests.⁵ The 60s and 70s also saw a sharp increase in museum and gallery attendance. The increase was the result of a prosperous economy, better education, and more leisure time. Some artists viewed the development with suspicion.⁶ Peter Hutchinson did not varnish his opinion when he described it as an amorphous and less dedicated audience informed by the popular press.⁷ It echoes artist and critic Brian O’Doherty’s statement that “we seem to have ended up with the wrong audience.”⁸

This text takes as its main focus the worries artists sometimes have about the capacity of the audience to experience, interpret and comprehend their work in a satisfactory manner. These worries are often, but not always, related to the idea that audiences in a media society are losing the ability to pay attention and focus. Artists worried - and worry - about this and incorporate strategies in their work that aim at triggering a more attentive perception. Because artists explicitly started to work around the concept “attention” in the 1960s and 70s, while also dealing with the presence of the audience, two case studies are taken from this period. We also look at works made by two contemporary artists. Media cultures have proliferated since the 1960s, and issues raised in the sixties and seventies have not disappeared. Media societies are saturated with stimuli that seek our attention via ever-present devices and channels. Urban spaces, homes, traffic, and cultural sites... are increasingly becoming sites of distraction. Perceptual

psychology has shown that even when we are attending to certain objects, other objects in our perceptual field—even when right in front of us—can go unnoticed.⁹ In societies with ever more distractions and overabundance; where dispersed attention is a necessity and continuous partial attention has become a survival strategy and cognitive habit,¹⁰ artists wonder about the duration and intensity with which we attend to works of art.

We however explicitly refrain from any generalizations. The sixties and seventies are for instance a period wherein artists experimented with the participation of the audience in many different ways. The physical involvement of the audience was often seen, as Claire Bishop wrote, as an “essential precursor for social change.”¹¹ Bishop characterized this preoccupation with participation as a strategy used by artists to downplay their authority.¹² The presence of the audience in other words—and the increased consciousness thereof amongst artists—often gave way to situations of empowerment. This also applies to the decade of the 1990s. The decade saw an artistic interest in projects that included the audience and aimed at participation, for many different reasons, amongst them a learning by doing attitude that was believed to trigger critical insights into social, economic, and political life.¹³ Working with or making work that involves the audience is often linked to ideas of liberation. In the sixties, the performative turn increasingly took off. It was a period, wherein, as Claire Bishop argued, “the breakdown of medium-specific art” as well as the “explosion of new technologies” inspired artistic experiments wherein the audience started to play a more substantial role.¹⁴ Audiences were no longer seen—as Duchamp would have it—as coming posterior to the creative act, but as central to it.¹⁵ Art historian Henry M. Sayre summed it up poignantly when he wrote that at the beginning of the seventies, “the site of presence in art had shifted from art’s object to art’s audience, from the textual or plastic to the experiential.”¹⁶ At the time artists started to favor screen-based work, time and process, interactivity, physical participation, the particularity of a site and so on. Erika Fischer-Lichte characterized the development as a “performative turn.” Texts and artifacts were no longer seen as the most important means by which cultures create their self-image and self-understanding. Staging something rather than making artefacts—in action painting, performances, light sculptures, body art, land art, video art and video installations ...—became increasingly important. Artists became performers and the audience was asked to move around and interact with artefacts and other members of the

audience.¹⁷ But in the sixties and seventies, not everybody felt confident about the abilities of this unknown and new audience. It moved American artist Bruce Nauman to demand the audience's attention. Other artists felt that the ability to pay attention and focus was extremely pressured in an expanding media and information society.

THE PROBLEM WITH ATTENTION

In 1973 Nauman made the works *PLEASE/PAY/ATTENTION/PLEASE* Fig. 1 and *Pay Attention* Fig. 2. They seem to aim for a perlocutionary effect: the audience paying attention. Are we not paying enough attention? Or is the sign a reminder for himself? He said: "I didn't want to present situations where people could have too much freedom to invent what they thought was going on ... I wanted it to be my idea."¹⁸ At the time, the artist was not keen on interpretations that carried meaning far off. He said: "I mistrust audience participation. That is why I try to make these works as limiting as possible."¹⁹ The immediacy and the call for attention are in other words intentional. It shows his distrust of the audience and its meaning-giving activity. Nauman developed art installations—narrow corridors Fig. 3—that allowed him to control the experience of his audience and make it more self-aware as well as attentive. He said: "I think that if you can control the situation physically, then you can have a similar kind of experience."²⁰ Control and immediacy can also be related to the expanding media culture of the period. Can we consider the works a reaction to, or an acting out of, the attention-demanding changes this brought about? Is the crude "Motherfucker" a raw evocation of the intrusiveness—aggressiveness—embedded within the attention economy's angling for the consumer's attention? The corridor is also a structure wherein dispersed attention is impossible: it is a narrow corridor, unidirectional with barely any possibilities of distraction.

American artist Dan Graham distrusted television society. He considered its information flow an asymmetrical imposition by capital.²¹ Attention became a topic in the work *Past Future Split Attention* (1972). Two performers were asked to walk around in a room. The first one had to predict the other one's future behaviour; while the second one had to recount the first one's past behaviour. The performers had to divide their attention as well as stay attentively under distractive circumstances. Was the artist evoking the difficulty of staying attentive within an expanding media and consumer culture? Was he referencing the issues of surveillance



Fig. 1
Bruce Nauman. *Please/Pay/Attention/Please*, 1973,
collage and Letraset, 70 x 70 cm.
© Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Fig. 2
Bruce Nauman. *Pay Attention*, 1973,
lithograph, 96,8 × 71,4 cm.
© Bruce Nauman /Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Fig. 3
Bruce Nauman, *Corridor Installation (Nick Wilder Installation)*, 1970,
wooden wallboards, water-based paint, three video cameras, scanner, frame, five monitors,
video recorder, video player, video (black and white, silent).
Photograph by Martin Seck.

and control within modern society? In the work *PERFORMANCE/AUDIENCE/MIRROR* (1977) ^{Fig. 4}, Graham placed himself in front of the audience with a large mirror behind his back. He described the behaviour of the audience as well as his own. He explained that he wanted to make the visitors aware of their own perceptual process as spectator.²² As such, it was necessary for him to guide and redirect their attention to their behaviour as spectator. He described people's carriage, sounds, facial expressions... The mirror reinforced his descriptions and people's attention to it, as well as their self-awareness. The performance also reflects media society's attempts to control people's attention. Graham however uses it to make the audience more attentive to their role as audience. The artist was convinced that mass media bombarded people with distorted realities. He stated: "TV might be metaphorically visualized as a mirror in which the viewing family sees an idealized ideologically distorted reflection of itself."²³ Making them attentive to their own role as spectator was a first step in the process of, as he desired, self-improvement.²⁴

Audiences expand. They do so because of the mediatization of the arts, the global art world expansion, the professionalization of art institutions, better education, and an increased valorisation of the creative.²⁵ Research informs us that people spend an average of 28 seconds watching an artwork and reading the associated labels.²⁶ How does more contemporary artists aim for their attention at a time when partial attention and quick switching between different attentive states seems to be a proliferating perceptive condition?

FOCUSED AND DISPERSED ATTENTION

Belgian painter Luc Tuymans dedicates his career to painting's actualisation in an age dominated by modern visual technologies. His paintings aim at capturing our attention and slowing down our perception. He uses painting to reflect upon the stories and related images that make up history, social life, and visual culture... Therefore, he paints from existing images. The artist knows that he faces an audience that not necessarily understands what he is doing. Painting he says, is "convincing the viewer to drop the luggage and look, especially in museum settings, where, unlike at a gallery, people who are not totally knowledgeable about the work will come to the museum and look at the paintings."²⁷ He states that "Doing a show for a mainstream public is extremely important."²⁸ Art needs to be seen by people and the artist realises that they are, the "last stop."²⁹ Tuymans aims for a pictorial precision that could possibly have his desired, intentional effect on the audience.³⁰

For the project *Secrets*, he agreed to have artificial intelligence (AI) look at his work.³¹ The resulting exhibition consists of the painting *Secrets* (1990) ^{Fig. 5}, explicatory texts, video interviews of the artist and scientist Luc Steels as well as projections that show the outcomes of the project. The painting is an interpretation of a photograph of Albert Speer, chief architect of the Nazi party who always denied knowing anything about concentration camps.³² One of the questions asked the AI was “where a person’s first attention would go?”³³ The AI found out that it was not the eyes, which is usually a focal point in a portrait, but the zone in the middle. By closing the eyes, an alteration made by the artist, our attention is drawn to the zone around the nose, as if directed to it by the downward position of the closed eyelids. It closes the face and makes it more ambivalent. The artist stated that this is intentional. The idea to create an ambiguous image ties in with the title *Secrets* and the idea of hiding something. The artist also cropped the original picture and used subdued colours and a sombre tonality. The AI created an expanding web of potential meanings based upon the different signifiers (closed eyes, sombre tonality, uniform, the title, ambiguity ...) in the painting. While the painting succeeds in capturing our attention and triggering certain associations; the mediation and information that encircles it in the exhibition, provide a context for the nourishment of our attention and interest. In a world wherein speed, the 28-second reality of art viewing, the overtly explicit and quick consumption of images rules, the artist decided to “work with belatedness” and choose to make his painted images “burn on our retina”, but to let them do it, “over time.”³⁴ Slowing our perception down, by pictorially manipulating photographic images, disrupting and altering them, using faded colours, sometimes painting intentionally unsharp, and so on are ways in which the artist tries to capture and hold our attention. The type of attention the artist seems to work with—or tries to trigger—is, as conceptualised by Bence Nanay, specific and distributed at the same time. Our attention is focused on the painting as a perceptual object, but it is distributed at the same time over various properties of the object. The starting point is the zone under the eyes. As Bence Nanay argues, this manner of exercising one’s attention is very different from the ways in which we attend in daily life. Here dispersed attention seems to come first.³⁵ But the project *Secrets* demonstrated that—notwithstanding the many associations a painting can trigger—, an intentional element is at play that succeeds in capturing our attention. We are looking where the artist wants us to look. We are steered by the properties of the



Fig. 4
Dan Graham, *Performer/Audience/Mirror*, 1977.
De Appel Arts Center, Amsterdam.
© Thijs Schouten, Amsterdam.

painted image in a direction that has a higher probability of triggering an attentive look at the elements that the artist considers important for the comprehension of the work.

Contemporary artists no longer mistrust the audience or see it as a victim of society or media culture as some artists did in previous decades. Many have accepted that the attribution of meaning and the experience of art can differ from their own intentions and ideas. The linguistic and performative turn have made that an undeniable fact. According to Dorothea von Hantelmann, the performative must be understood as a dramaturgic concept that realizes itself both in the act of creation and in the experience of the artwork by the audience.³⁶ This increased role of the audience was sharply described by cultural theorist Mieke Bal:

“When we are standing before a work of art, and when we admire it, are touched, moved, or even terrified by it, when a work of art somehow seems to do something to us, the question of artistic intention loses its obviousness, for the artist is no longer there to direct our response. He disappears, gives his work over to a public he will not know.”³⁷

But although there is an openness to what audiences bring to their work, it does not mean that artists have given up their desire for a more attentive perception of their work. Swiss installation artist Thomas Hirschhorn engages audiences in environments full of stuff. He plunges them in a repetitive abundance of material, visual and textual signifiers that trigger associations with capitalist limitless production. He states: “In today’s society meaning is diluted by an overload of information.”³⁸ The artist uses the overload, but rearranges it in such a way that the never-ending flow of goods acquires a comprehensible look **Fig. 6**. The repetition of objects and signifiers makes a continuous change of focus—in contrast to our daily lives—unnecessary. Interestingly enough, Hirschhorn uses our current perceptive realities—the predominance of distributed attention in a media, consumer, and information saturated society—but structures his installations and environments in such a way that the patterns and repetition of objects and other signifiers create a cohesion that can be apprehended in a focussed attentive way. The environments and sculptures do not invite us to zoom in or pay much attention to details. What they do is have us “scan” them while they impregnate our attention with an overall insightful impression of the messy economic and political realities that surround us. There is no room



Fig. 5
Luc Tuymans, *Secrets*, 1990,
oil on canvas, 52 × 37 cm,
Private Collection, Courtesy Studio Luc Tuymans, Antwerp.



Fig. 6
Thomas Hirschhorn, *TOO TOO-MUCH MUCH*, project, 2010,
Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle, Belgium,
© 2010, courtesy of Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris and the artist, photo: Romain Lopez.

here for disregard or inattention. The fragility of life, the precariousness of our lives and living conditions, demands from him as he states, that “I be present, attentive, open; it demands that I be active.”³⁹ Does he desire a similar attentive and open attitude of us?

Confronted with their 28-second audiences, contemporary artists actively seek to engage the spectator’s attention as well as (partially) ground their intention in the experience of the work. Attention may no longer be an explicit subject of art, but the desire for an attentive perception on the part of the audience still marks in many ways contemporary artistic strategies, just as it did in the sixties and seventies.

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- 2 Kaprow, "The Artist as a Man of the World," 54.
- 3 Kaprow, "The Artist as a Man of the World," 49.
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- 5 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).
- 6 For an extensive analysis of this issue in the work of Bruce Nauman and Allan Kaprow see: Patrick Van Rossem, "Getting Up-close and Personal with Aunt May and Uncle Jim. Some thoughts on how to deal with your audience in the 1960s," *Performance Research*, 22 (3), (2017): 69–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2017.1348663>.
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- 11 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 12.
- 12 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 12.
- 13 The phenomenon is theorized by Nicholas Bourriaud in his book *Relational Aesthetics*. See Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: les presses du réel, 2002).
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- 17 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theater als Modell für eine performative Kultur—Zum performative turn in der europäischen Kultur des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Saarbrücken: Universität des Saarlandes, 2000), 3.
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- 22 Dan Graham quoted in: Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh, "Dan Graham: Mirror Complexities," *Border Crossings*, Issue 12, 2010. <https://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/dan-graham-mirror-complexities>. Accessed March 5, 2021.
- 23 Dan Graham, "Video as Architectural Mirror and Window," in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, eds. Doug Hall, Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture, 1990), 168.
- 24 Dan Graham interviewed by Ludger Gerdes (1991). In: Alberro (ed.), *Dan Graham*, 83.
- 25 Just think of the popular concept 'creative industries'.
- 26 Lisa F. Smith, Jeffrey K. Smith, and Pablo T.L. Tinio, "Time spent viewing art and reading labels," *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts* 11, no. 1 (Febr. 2016): 77–85. <https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000049>.
- 27 Luc Tuymans speaking about the audience, in: Lauren Viera, "An intense Intension," *Chicago Tribune*, October 2, 2010.
- 28 Viera, *Intense Intension*, 2010.
- 29 Viera, *Intense Intension*, 2010.
- 30 The artist frequently explains his act of creation. He has often stated that the creation of a painting only takes a day because of his short span of attention and also because it helps him to keep the intensity and precision he so desires. Viera, *Intense Intension*, 2010. Or: David Coggins, "Takeover artist," *artnet*, Sept. 2009. See: <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/coggins/luc-tuymans9-16-09.asp>. (Accessed March 8, 2021) The artist has also stated that "art only has value because of the intention of the artist". See: Els Maas, "Nieuwe expo van Luc Tuymans bestaat uit één kunstwerk: 'Dit is een gevecht tegen de dommgheid,'" *De Morgen*, April 3, 2021. See: <https://www.demorgen.be/tv-cultuur/nieuwe-expo-van-tuymans-bestaat-uit-een-kunstwerk-dit-is-een-gevecht-tegen-dommgheid~b63c0c9b/>. Accessed March 8, 2021.
- 31 Exhibition at BOZAR art centre Brussels, Belgium from April 3 to May 2, 2021. See: <https://readymag.com/u3083945729/secrets-guide/>. Accessed March 8, 2021. The exhibition project is one of the outcomes of a project wherein the artist and AI expert Luc Steels (Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, VUB) explore what AI can mean for, or bring to art and creativity and painting in particular as well as what AI can learn about itself in the process.
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