

The representation of audiences after 1960: An analysis from the perspective of artistic intent versus audience experience and interpretation

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Abstract:

In *The representation of the audiences after 1960*, the question is asked whether we can consider the representation of the audience after 1960 in relation to artists' ideas on the presence of an audience and its meaning giving activity. The focus is both on the representation of individual audience members or participants as well as on visitor groups. Since the 1960s the audience for art has grown and museums have seen their attendance rise. It has led amongst others to a more sophisticated mediation between artwork and audience. Since the 1960s one can also observe an increased awareness amongst artists of the fact that the experience of art and the attribution of meaning to art is differential in nature. But have artists accepted this reality? And can they ever come to terms with a critical art mediation that invites audiences to relate to art more subjectively? Analyses of both the representation of audiences and artists' ideas on the presence of the audience shows that artists have been and are sometimes still struggling with these issues. In recent times however we can detect a growing acceptance of a more free and personal interpretation of art by the audience. Artists such as Michelangelo Pistoletto, Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, Thomas Struth, Rineke Dijkstra, and Sophie Calle have represented audiences in ways that reveal their – positive, negative, worrying... - attitudes towards the presence of an interpreting, art consuming, desiring audience. These insights are, in conclusion, related to instances of self-presentation by the audience, marked by play and freedom.

Keywords: audience, modern and contemporary art, reception aesthetics, spectator, intention, art interpretation, experience of art, representation of audiences

Introduction

While reading my online newspaper I came across a headline that caught my attention. It read: 'How do I look at modern art without looking like an uncultivated swine?'¹ The question was posed by a young man to what is commonly referred to as an 'agony aunt;' in popular culture generally considered an expert on all kinds of matters, mostly of the heart, and now, it seems, also of art. The youngster wrote that he was going to visit an exhibition with his girlfriend. He confessed that he finds it hard to understand what he sees and he did not want to make a bad impression. Being an art historian who researches the reception of art by audiences and artists' attitudes towards the presence of audiences, the worry did not surprise me. There seems to be an almost natural symbiosis between modern and contemporary art and the worry of not knowing how to deal with it. Even connoisseurs are not unaffected by it. In 1950, art historian Ernst Gombrich vulnerably shared his worries about how to deal with the contemporary art of the day. He called it 'the 'pure art' of exhibitions and galleries,' that 'many of us find hard to understand.'²

In this essay, I will attempt to show that the representation of art audiences since 1960 can be understood in relation to concerns artists have about the presence of an audience and its role in meaning-making. Artists have intentions. Sometimes outspoken. Sometimes just a desire to have a certain impact. Talking about his work in the seventies, American artist Bruce Nauman stated, '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, and I did not want people to invent the art.'³ Many artists have - just like Nauman - ideas and concerns about how their work is best experienced and interpreted. Do these concerns inhabit some of the representations of the art audiences since 1960?

The 1960s 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, to a greater or lesser extent, played a more substantial role.⁴ It is also a period that saw an increased audience for art due to a prosperous economy and more leisure time. Michael Fried, who fiercely opposed the acknowledgment of the audience in and by art, argued that by the seventies, 'theatrical, beholder-based art definitely held the field.'⁵ It is, in other words, a period wherein there is heightened awareness amongst artists of the presence of the audience. It develops into the seventies and some of the cases discussed are situated in that period. I also look at works made in the beginning of the 21st century. At play, here, are issues having to do with mass tourism, education, and a greater openness towards more subjective readings of art. I focus on works made by male and female artists, geographically situated in the United States and Western-Europe. I consider artworks of Bruce Nauman (°1941), Dan Graham (°1942), Michelangelo Pistoletto (°1933), Thomas Struth (°1954), Sophie Calle (°1953), Rineke Dijkstra (°1959). My focus on different media – video, installation, photography, the performing body, but also mirrors – corresponds with the proliferation of media in post-war art.

The audience is not a homogenous group. The audience of an artist changes over time, and it is also different, depending on what kind of art institution in which an artist

exhibits. One could suspect that younger artists have an audience that is not unfamiliar; that is part of their artist community. Museums attract a larger, more differentiated audience. It is all the more remarkable that artists, at least those under consideration here, do not really differentiate when talking about the audience. Often, what happens is that a more general image, an idea of the identity of the audience, is formed that has implications for the kind of 'audienceship' (as opposed to spectatorship) the work produces. We use the terms visitor, audience, and audience member and avoid using viewer, beholder, and spectator because of their ocularcentric connotations. Much of the work under consideration, here, relates in complex ways to the body, uses sound, requires reading, and so on.

There can be many reasons why artists represent audiences. Just think of the representation of patrons, collectors, critics. Throughout history artists have represented audiences in the act of experiencing art, especially since the rise of public museums in the late 18th and 19th century. This new reality of publicly engaging with art - these new scenes from contemporary public life - somehow had to be captured for others to witness. Many of these iconographic traditions continue up to the present day. Artistic experiment, and the use of new media, have added new forms of audience representation, in relation to changing artistic, economic, social, political, and art institutional realities. For example, one can think of the fascinating study of Cristina Albu, entitled *Mirror Affect*.⁶ The author researches the use of mirrors, reflective screens, cybernetic systems, and closed circuit television by artists. These media reflect, mirror, or televise audience members and make them more aware of the presence of other audience members. It shows an artistic interest in triggering interpersonal acts of mirroring. Albu relates this to the decade's growing consciousness of the interpersonal construction of identity, as well as of the precariousness of social relation in societies marked by an accelerated interconnectivity.

Here, I look at the representation of audiences in relation to artists' attitudes towards the presence of an audience that is – partially or completely – unfamiliar and brings unknown and unpredictable understandings to a work of art. When artists talk about the audience, as we will see, they are talking about an image they have of the audience. It is often not imagined as an ideal all-understanding audience. When artists express a desire to be meaningfully understood, that expression often contains contradictions and worries about the probability of that desire. Take, for example, contemporary Cameroonian-Belgian artist Pascale Marthine Tayou. The artist stated, 'To me an installation should be a provocation in the fullest sense of the word. It should prompt sensations and reflections in the viewer. I know that all viewers look at the space from their own point of view.'⁷ But he also stated, 'I don't want people thinking I'm out to amuse the public. I'm here because this is where I am totally myself. I need people to feel my guts.'⁸ 'Feel my guts' obviously betrays a desire to have a certain, intended or even related to one's person, kind of effect. The acknowledgment of the fact that visitors bring their own perspectives does not necessarily contradict this desire, but they do stand in a tense relationship with one another.⁹ What the statement does show is that many artists, even - as we will see - in the sixties, did not, as French philosopher Jacques Rancière suggests, consider the audience as a passive entity

that needed to be activated. The verbal and visual representation of the audience since the 1960s often seems to suggest quite the contrary.

Before we delve deeper into these issues, I want to briefly return to the newspaper article mentioned at the start of the essay, for it gives me the chance to evoke a certain cultural climate surrounding audiences today. The agony aunt advised that the young man should give his own meaning to the work, appreciating it from a subjective point of view. She firmly stressed that he should not read the labels or any other information on the work given by experts.¹⁰ The advice is of course a hyper-individualistic and romantic view that somehow believes that ‘truth’ resides in one’s inner self rather than in the exchange of ideas and perceptions. It echoes, in an unnuanced way, the findings and achievements of decades of artistic, theoretical, art educational and philosophical inquiries into the interpretation of art, representation, and authorship. Whether it is Roland Barthes’ ‘Death of the author,’¹¹ George E. Hein’s ‘Constructivist Museum,’¹²; Jacques Rancière’s ‘Emancipated Spectator,’¹³ or Erika Fischer-Lichte’s spectators as actors,¹⁴ all of them, and others, have advocated for the recognition of the audience as an important meaning-producing presence. And throughout the second half of the 20th century and first decades of the 21st, the audience has received an increasingly more prominent place in our thinking about art, as well as the institutional, educational, and curatorial preoccupations with it. One wonders: if Vasari (1511–1574) were alive today, would he not, rather than write his book on the lives of the ‘most excellent’ artists, consider writing a vita of the distinguished audience for art?¹⁵ For, today, it is a force to be reckoned with. Mieke Bal framed it poignantly: ‘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. What happens after the work has been made is not determinable by artistic will.’¹⁶ But is disappearing a condition liked by artists? Is the absence of artistic will something they find comfortable?¹⁷

The unknown audience

In 1964, artist and critic Allan Kaprow warned artists when he said that misinterpretations would befall them. Unlike some critics at the time – Edward T. Chase spoke of a revolutionary shift from economic values to noneconomic values in society¹⁸ – Kaprow did not perceive the presence of a mass audience for art without worries. The sixties’ rise of mass audiences for art was a consequence of the post-war economic boom, better education, and more leisure time. Audiences were also drawn to art because of a growing mediatization of it. Kaprow advised his colleagues that they should start educating the mass audiences themselves. 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.’¹⁹ Kaprow

was of the opinion that artists themselves should place at the disposal of the audience those new thoughts that would enable their work to be better understood.

According to Sandra Stich, the media 'explosion' in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s had a huge impact on society. The rapid pace of technological developments in print and electronic media brought people in contact with a common pool of images, ideas, and opinions. The uniformization of information profoundly shaped how people thought and looked at the world.²⁰ This historical reality colors Kaprow's perception of the audience. Rather than seeing audience members as passive or as philistines, he thought of them as 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.²¹

In the 1960s, museums and galleries saw an increase of their visitor numbers. In 1965, New York's Museum of Modern Art announced that attendance had reached a record high of 1,058,700.²² The growing interest in art is also reflected in the increase of commercial art galleries and alternative art spaces. In 1965 there were two hundred and forty six commercial art galleries in New York, a doubling in comparison with the previous decade.²³ Great Britain, and London in particular, saw a growing international tourism, also for art, that was in part triggered by Britain's swinging sixties reputation for cultural and artistic experiment and creativity.²⁴ During the 1950s and 1960s, Italy saw huge economic and social changes that prompted a demand for popular versions of high culture. As Emma Barron argued, 'Italians enjoyed and found meaning in their chosen forms of high culture, as magazines and television carried the adaptations of Italy's humanist traditions and the Western Cultural Canon into the industrially produced mass culture and modern life.'²⁵ The increased interest in art came from an audience that matured in a mass media society. In the United States, critic Peter Schjeldahl pejoratively described it as an audience 'whose attention span could be measured in milliseconds.'²⁶ Art critic Harold Rosenberg stated that the American art world of the 1960s had commenced to consolidate itself on a mass-audience basis. He also wrote that it 'inaugurated a decade of pedagogy.'²⁷ The latter remark was his way of – negatively - characterising Pop Art's choice for a popular iconography. But the impact of the presence of a growing audience for art did not only play a role in the changes that art went through. It also affected museum education.

The 1970s is the decade wherein museums in the United States became educational institutions, a change that had been developing since the 1950s and 1960s.²⁸ In the mid-twentieth century, for instance, MoMA's educator Victor D'Amico reached hundreds of thousands of people via all kinds of outreach programs. They aimed at surpassing the traditional white museum audience via outreach programs in Afro-American communities.²⁹ The debate on museum and art education intensified in the 1970s. It was characterised by ideological oppositions between conservators and educators; between more traditional approaches versus more behaviouristic and experimental approaches. The situation was not unsimilar in Europe, where in The Netherlands, for instance, critic Cor Blok argued, in 1965, that the future tasks of the museum should be co-defined by the audience, a statement far removed from the more commonly held perception of the lay audience. The rise in

attendance in this period had led to a growth of educational departments in the Netherlands. But it did not – with few exceptions – really change the dominant ‘aesthetic museum’ model.³⁰ All these discussions, institutional changes, growing number of art spaces, and increased audiences for art, as well as the mediatisation of art, show us that there was a changed climate, wherein the audience was a much more manifest presence. It is a cultural climate wherein artists’ works could be seen potentially by hundreds of thousands of people rather than just by a familiar in-crowd. Is this – partially – the motivation behind some of the transient representations of the audience in the sixties and seventies?

I Visitatori (1962 – 1968) is a work made by Italian artist Pistoletto. It belongs to the series entitled *Quadri specchianti* or *Mirror Paintings*. The series consists of several works wherein the artist silkscreened images of people onto reflecting steel surfaces. The images show people life-sized, cut out from their original contexts, and positioned within the reflecting field of the ‘mirror.’ The figures find their origin in Pistoletto’s personal artistic context. We see female nudes, a studio, visitors, a collector, people installing art, and so on.



Michelangelo Pistoletto, *I Visitatori*, 1962-1968

Painted tissue paper on polished stainless steel, two parts, 220 x 120 cm each

Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Roma, Italy. Photo: @cinematic_mood

Many works represent two or more people with their backs turned towards the audience, while looking at something. The titles also refer to the act of looking: *The visitors*, *The voyeurs*, *Spectators nr. 1*, *Girl taking a picture*. In *I Visitatori*, a man holds and looks at a piece of paper while a woman stares into the depth of the reflected space. The man looks as if he is reading an art gallery handout, while the woman seems to be looking at art. The

work reflects the space wherein it is hung, thus varying the context in which the represented and reflected visitors are positioned. Pistoletto, who explicitly turned away from expressionist idioms and post-war informal painting stated, 'Every piece I make is a liberation and not a construction that is intended to represent me. ... Every piece I make is destined to proceed on its own way by itself without dragging me along behind it, since I am already somewhere else and doing something different.'³¹ The statement has affinity with Mieke Bal's quote: 'The artist is no longer here to direct our response.'³² Pistoletto provides the audience with a space that is not entirely filled up with his personal presence. According to Claire Gilman, Pistoletto might have been inspired here by Umberto Eco's 1962 book *Opera Aperto* (Open Work).³³

The mirror invites us to join the other visitors in the picture. It makes us clear that we are there, in that particular moment, space, and role. It becomes a space wherein our meaning-giving activity is welcomed. But what kind of space did the audience get? The figures represented on the mirror are absorbed in their activity. Their thoughts are unknowable; their intentions for being there inscrutable. Our reflected presence in the mirror shows us that we are there and that we are a complicit presence in the work of art and in its creation; that the work of art is also about us. The woman staring into the reflected space is also looking at the reflected audience members, thus heightening their sense of being involved. But what does it tell us about our presence and our interpretive act? Literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin pointed out that we should not think of the audience as an abstraction. He said that 'contemporary literary scholars usually define a listener who is immanent in the work as an all understanding, ideal listener. ... This, of course, is neither an empirical listener nor a psychological idea, an image of the listener in the soul of the author. It is an abstract ideological formulation.'³⁴ Indeed, Bakhtin pointed out that such an idea cannot bring anything new to our understanding of art, for works of art are also created as to answer to a picture; an idea in the mind of the author – and by analogy the artist – on the identity of the audience. Pistoletto's mirror does not represent an ideal all-understanding audience. It represents the actual audience. But what kind of 'audienceship' is produced here? Are we, when looking in the mirror, not looking at the audience thought of as an enigma? As an interpretive anonymous public persona – a visitor amongst other visitors producing stories amidst other stories - whose interpretive acts are forever unknown, closed for both artist and fellow visitors past, present, and future? The space of the mirror holds captive the many stories that have been and will be invented about it. It is a blank space as well as a space full of potential. Indeed, are the audience members' thoughts and impressions not in essence ungraspable, fleeting..., just like the act of mirroring itself?

In the sixties and seventies, artists seemed to be so intimidated by the presence of an audience that seemed to long for it in its life, that they 'abolished' the work of art as an intermediate between the audience and themselves. As if the artist had to come in and see this desiring audience with his or her own eyes. American artist Dan Graham stated, 'The performances were based on the present-time consciousness of the artist (who in the performances was temporarily replacing the art object) and the spectator's present-time

perceptions.’³⁵ In *PERFORMANCE / AUDIENCE / MIRROR*, first performed in 1977, in the then already renowned De Appel Arts Centre in Amsterdam, the artist placed himself in front of a seated audience with a large mirror covering the wall behind him. He paced up and down before the audience, while variably looking at it, or at himself and the audience, in the mirror. Alternately he described his behaviour and that of the audience. He did so in a descriptive and almost mechanical way.³⁶



Dan Graham, *Performer/Audience/Mirror*, 1977. De Appel Arts Center, Amsterdam. Courtesy Dan Graham and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

Graham stated, ‘The spectator became very important. So I got involved with the performer I thought ought to be the spectator in their own perceptual process. One of the reasons this happened was when I was 14 I read parts of *Being and Nothingness* by Sartre. The mirror stage comes from Sartre’s idea that the child has an idea of itself in terms of ego’.³⁷ It seems that mirroring and describing the audience finds its origin in Graham’s desire to make it more self-conscious of its own role as audience. Graham retrospectively explained that, although he thinks that middle class people see art as something educational, and the masses see it more in terms of entertainment, both bring all kinds of assumptions they have on art, social life, family... to the work. He considers it a necessity; for those assumptions the work has to take on. So whether you are an art lover, eager to learn from art, or you come to art more in terms of distraction, is not the main issue for Graham. What is, is that people bring ‘an interest in self-improvement’ to it.³⁸ Graham believed that his art could have a transformative effect; for everybody has assumptions, ideas, and views that are possibly up for change and amelioration. Provided, however, that people are willing to question them. Questioning one’s beliefs was not a luxury. Graham has alluded many times in interviews and texts that mass media society bombards 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 represented in the typical TV genres: the situation comedy or the soap opera.³⁹ Graham's ideas on the workings of art clearly suggest that he knows that the effect of art is not self-evident and that it is partly-dependant on the willingness of audiences. Can we, partially, detect here the motor behind the choice for a more perlocutionary performative aesthetic? During the performance, Graham described people's carriage, sounds, laughs, facial expressions. He pointed out that someone was standing rather than sitting and thus not really part of the group, or he described whether the front row was any different from the back row and so on. The mirror reinforced the artists' descriptions. The event was aimed at making the audience more aware of itself and its role as audience. Hence also the choice for a more durational artform. He also tried to challenge the audience members' anonymity by singling out individuals and rows, as well as describing behavioural correspondences between individuals and their expressive reactions. The transient, but also intrusive, representation of the audience, voiced by Graham and reflected in the mirror, were the means by which the artist guided his audience towards the - potentially - self-questioning attitude he so desired from them.

Bruce Nauman honestly stated in 1970, ' [...] I mistrust audience participation. That is why I try to make these works as limiting as possible. I can only give so much, [...] It has more to do with me not allowing people to make their own performance out of my art.'⁴⁰ The remark opposes the idea that, in the sixties and seventies, the choice for a more performative aesthetic, as well as audience participation, reflected the era's strive towards a more free and democratic society. Claire Bishop wrote in this regard that the physical involvement of the audience was seen as an 'essential precursor for social change.'⁴¹ Bishop characterizes this as a strategy used by artists to downplay their authority.⁴² But can this argument be kept up in relation to some of Nauman's early works, wherein the choice for a more performative aesthetic seems to be a method of reasserting rather than relinquishing artistic control? The artist was worried about the presence of the audience, because he did not know who it was. 'It is difficult to address yourself to an anonymous public,' he said.⁴³ He mistrusted it, because he feared that people would interpret his work erroneously, thus alienating him from it. Whether or not the suspicion is legitimate is not relevant. Nauman had an idea in his mind on the identity of the audience as those who could possibly misunderstand him. He said, 'I did not want people to invent the art.'⁴⁴ In the beginning of the seventies, he developed an art form that would somehow allow him to control aesthetic experience. He explained, 'I think that if you can control the situation physically, then you can have a certain amount of similarity. People are sufficiently similar so that you can have at least a similar kind of experience....I don't like to leave things open so that people feel they are in a situation they can play games with....Partly it has to do with control, I guess.'⁴⁵

In *Live-Taped Video Corridor* (1970), we can see this dual relation with the audience at play. The work consists out of a long narrow wooden corridor wherein at the end two stacked televisions are placed. On one of the televisions pre-taped footage is shown of the empty corridor. The second monitor is connected with a camera placed at the corridor's entrance. Visitors entering the corridor are videotaped from the back. As they walk towards

the monitor, they see themselves being taped from the back, while diminishing and eventually disappearing from the screen as they get closer to it. This transient representation of the audience reminds us that it is not a posterior fact in the act of creation but that it can occupy a troubling spot in its very core. What we have here is nothing less than a fundamental crisis between artist and audience, a communication and representation debacle wherein the artist can only act out his unease about the presence of an audience he does not know. Ultimately, the audience is confronted with its own absence in the screen, its own disappearance; a disappearance that speaks of the artists' anguish about the very presence of the audience.



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), Friedrich Christian Flick Collection im Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin. Photo: Friedrich Christian Flick Collection im Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin

Moving closer and giving voice

Since the second half of the twentieth century, artists have had to deal with the mass consumption of art, semantic multiplicity, and the differential nature of experience, as well as – increasingly - a critical museum pedagogy that does not necessarily prioritize artistic intent. Audiences complete artworks. Their presence is essential for art. Marcel Duchamp's characterisation in 1957 of the creative act, already gave the audience a prominent place: 'The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.'⁴⁶ It is not hard to imagine that artists somehow worry about this condition, or that they are curious as to what this contribution might be, or maybe wonder if they can use it to their advantage. Under consideration, now, are some representations produced in the early 21st century. The jump in time is obviously motivated by lack of space, due to the limitations a journal contribution has. However, it also sharpens the argument that the representation of the audience under consideration shows a significant 'détente' on the side of the artist – as time goes by – with regard to the meaning-making activity of the audience. The artists under consideration all situate their representations firmly in a museum context, related amongst others to museum education, mass tourism, and subjective experiences of art.

German artist-photographer Thomas Struth, who made much-acclaimed photographs of audiences in the process of watching art, got fascinated by the way people enact with historic paintings in museums. Two things troubled him. Museums seemed like cemeteries, with works lined up and presented as iconic masterpieces. He asked himself – a question that arose because he considered the people he photographed as potential viewers of his own work - if the works could still be living organisms nourishing viewers. He set himself the task of recovering them from their iconic status and fetishized condition.⁴⁷ A second thing which troubled him was that people walked the line they were supposed to follow. He explained that they take in one, then a second, and so on until, when a work truly shakes them, they are so exhausted that they can no longer take it in or appreciate it, he stated.⁴⁸ A visit to the museum, so it seems, is an exhaustive and blunting ritual, where people perform roles that they are supposed to perform. It robs works, which already blind us because of their iconic status, from any meaningful impact, according to Struth. We learn from his remarks that he conceived the photographs with a specific purpose: they have to perform a task and remind people that artworks are made to be looked at, enjoyed, and maybe even learned from. Struth's desire situates itself within an early shift, theorized by art historians Joanna Lowry, away from considering photographs as images in favor of seeing them as performative practices that allow the technology to perform different functions. Photography is hereby understood as an action, as something that does something.⁴⁹ This shift places photography in the social realm rather than solemnly in the aesthetic. If we look at Struth's series entitled *Audiences*, we can see that he does indeed use photography in this way.



Thomas Struth, *Hermitage 3*, Sint Petersburg, 2005
Chromogenic print, 114,0 x 144,8 cm © Thomas Struth

Hermitage 3 – Sint-Petersburg (2005) shows us people, in front view, looking at an artwork. Their presence fills the image. It provides the audience looking at it with a mirror image of itself. In the photograph, we see pensive and dreamlike behaviour, searching for detail, attention. The work also reveals how art can become an object of mass consumption. By capturing the visitors' postures and facial expressions, the picture performatively aims at making the audience more self-conscious of its own behaviour. The picture could indeed reveal something of the interiorized behavioural codes people adopt when looking at art. The questions posed by Struth seems to be: is this who you are? Why are you here, behaving as such? It corresponds with his desire to make 'everything so complex and detailed' in a photograph 'that you could look at them forever and never see everything.'⁵⁰ Here we can see what Struth really desires of his audience: to invest time in art and not, as Schjeldahl stated, spend only a few milliseconds per work. Underneath this desire, there is also a personal issue at play. Struth stated that he himself invests so much in his art that he often feels bare. But to him the audience, notwithstanding the image he has of it as a consumer audience, still remains a mystery. It is an unbalanced situation, so much so that the artist once stated, 'Give me a break and let me know who you are!'⁵¹ Observing and photographing audience members in the act of looking at art is one way of achieving – albeit only partially - an answer to this question.

It makes sense to briefly look again at the growing importance of museum education. Although curator voices are still prominent, one cannot deny that museum education is experimenting widely and that the authoritative monologue voice of the museum is increasingly questioned. Theories of museum pedagogy has embraced concepts such as Jacques Rancière's 'emancipated spectator', which implies that spectators are no longer seen as those in need of an education. He argues that audience members should be

seen as experts in their own right, and the fixed distribution of roles ought to be questioned permanently.⁵² Nina Simon argues that people are allowed to construct their own meaning from personal experiences about art and that it should be a fundamental aspect of museum education. The participatory museum she envisions showcases ‘the diverse creations and opinions of non-experts.’⁵³ Art institutions are assimilating – in variable degrees - these ideas. The Dutch van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, for example, has offered visitors the chance to contribute stories to artworks that are then exhibited next to the artwork. Visitors could engage in a role – a flaneur, a pilgrim, a tourist or worker – that had its own appropriate educational tool. The museum hoped that roleplaying would somehow make people more conscious of the role that they were already playing as museum audience. It aimed for a more active rather than passive audience.⁵⁴

It is compelling to see the work of both Rineke Dijkstra and Sophie Calle as strongly related to contemporary educational realities, as well as to the audience-oriented pedagogies. Both works have, for instance, strong ties with the Visual Thinking Strategies method developed in the 1990s by Philip Yenawine and Abigail Housen. The method seeks to empower individuals and make them self-sufficient viewers by asking open questions about works of art, rather than overwhelm them with jargon and art historical discourses. It enables people to start from their own knowledge and skills, as well as use their own abilities. The method also stresses the importance of discussions with peers and the idea of viewing through verbalizing.⁵⁵ Why are these artists – Dijkstra, Calle, as well as Struth - representing audiences within a museum educational context? Why now? It surely has to do with the omnipresence of museum and gallery education, in itself a consequence of the increased museum attendance as well as political and social evolutions. Or are these works variations within the so called educational turn in art that took off in the second half of the 1990s and of which Irit Rogoff has stated that it has at its core, the free, uninhibited and subjective articulation of truths?⁵⁶ The works – by Calle and Dijkstra - seem to suggest that artists are fascinated by the multiple stories people – adults and children - are able to invent about art.

I see a woman crying (Weeping Woman) (2009-2010) is a work by Dutch artist Rineke Dijkstra. During a residency in Tate Liverpool in 2008 Dijkstra got interested in the educational sessions wherein schoolchildren were asked to look at works of art and discuss them. The artist was fascinated by the children’s very personal, sometimes emotional and imaginative, reactions. She asked a group of pre-adolescent schoolchildren to look at the painting *Weeping Woman* (1937) by Pablo Picasso and videotaped them.⁵⁷ The result can be seen in a twelve minute three screen video piece wherein we, just like in the photograph of Struth, do not see the artwork, but only the faces and postures of the children and their interactions and reactions to and descriptions of it. We see several children, sometimes in close up, dressed in a school uniform, attentively focusing. At first, the children mainly describe forms and colours. After a while they attribute emotional states to the image: serious, sad, lonely, scared. Stories develop: ‘She looks like she just disobeyed someone,’ ‘she bites her nails because she is nervous,’ ‘she cries because she is lonely,’ ‘nobody wants

to be her friend.’ The children agree or disagree, and the stories mix. The painting functions as a trigger for narratives built around typical anxieties, fears, and realities of these children.



Rineke Dijkstra, *I see a Woman Crying (Weeping Woman)*, 2009 Video-installation
Installation shot Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2010.
Courtesy the artist and Jan Mot, Brussels

Their subjective reactions to the work are filled with experiences and feelings common to their age. Dijkstra’s work, however, not only speaks of these children’s imaginations. It also evokes the potential art has in triggering a polyphonic richness in not so conditioned minds. The work captively shows us the richness embedded in a more profound and personal relation with art and the advantages of a more active and social encounter with art.

But does this truly mean that the artist herself is comfortable with the idea that the attribution of meaning to a work of art, her work, can differ strongly from possible intended effects and meanings? Dijkstra has stated that it is important for her to restrain herself from judgement in her work, leaving enough room for interpretation.⁵⁸ She also stated that when making a video, she likes to ‘create circumstances where things can happen. I am a director at the point, but at the same time I want to leave things open. So it’s sort of a mixture of trying to have control and not having control.’⁵⁹ She also said she leaves out a lot in the scene, ‘so that the space for interpretation is limited,’ and this, because then the work becomes ‘equal for everybody looking at it.’⁶⁰ The carefully built up montage of the video suggests that aesthetic choices have been made in order to partly control the experience of the work. It tells us that the unavoidable differential condition of art is an accepted reality.

The idea to create this work originates, after all, in the artist's desire to make a work that explicitly deals with the idea that many different truths can co-exist.⁶¹ But the hope, or desire, to trigger certain experiences via well thought through aesthetic choices and a rather directive montage, has certainly not disappeared.

French artist Sophie Calle has turned the differential condition of art to her advantage. Her thoughts on being misunderstood, however, speak of the anguish it brings about: 'Instead of being upset about being misinterpreted, I go looking for it, I hope for it, I wait for it. It's the right method, turning things to my advantage in order not to suffer from them.'⁶² This is apparent in the work entitled *What do you see?* (2013), which presents itself in the form of a colour photograph of someone looking at an empty picture frame and a piece of text next to it. The context is the art theft of works by Manet, Vermeer, and Rembrandt, amongst others, from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston in 1990. When Isabella Stewart Gardner died in 1924, her will stipulated that the arrangement of the works could not be altered. After the theft, with the stipulation in mind, the museum restored the picture frames and hung them – empty - back in place. In 2013, Sophie Calle - who was in Boston at the time of the theft - asked visitors and museum staff to sit or stand in front of the empty frames. She then asked them the open question 'What do you see?' The visual trope of the photograph is clearly that of the 'Rückenfigur,' a figure in the picture plane turned with his back towards the spectator. In his analyses of the elaborate use of it by Caspar David Friedrich, Joseph Leo Koerner argued that the silence that befalls the 'Rückenfigur' is not so much mediating a meaning attributed by the 'Rückenfigur' to the landscape, but 'an experience of the full presence of landscape.'⁶³ In Sophie Calle's *What do you see? The concert. Vermeer*. We see a blond seated woman in a yellow shirt staring into the empty frame and dark space left by the theft of the Vermeer painting. She too is a 'Rückenfigur,' but unlike the 'Rückenfigur' as a figure who somehow reflects the enigmatic in man's sensible contact with nature, she has been allowed to speak her thoughts and feelings about what she sees.

The dark space wherein Calle's 'Rückenfigur' stares is a space full of potential; a space wherein – to evoke it with Rancière – the emancipated spectator is invited to add stories to the many stories that enrich the artwork's life. The woman's words tell us that she has never seen *The Concert* (ca. 1664) by Vermeer. She evokes it based upon a reproduction she once saw. She describes the texture and colour of the frame and the velvet background that replaces the canvas. The woman muses on the emptiness and tell us that the velvet 'image' is both sad and nostalgic. Her musing goes on and changes into a dream wherein she is looking for the work. It is a dream wherein images of chairs, cars, plastic bags appear and wherein a failed recovery of the painting leads to the hope that one day it will be found. No longer is that which is perceived engulfing the 'Rückenfigur' into an enigmatic silence. On the contrary, the audience in the picture is given voice. It turns Vermeer's concert into a contemporary testimonial of the polyphonic potential of art as well as of the traces artworks and the lives they lead leave in the experiences of people.



Sophie Calle, *WHAT DO YOU SEE? THE CONCERT. VERMEER.*, 2013

Colour photograph, text, frames (plexiglass and metal frames), 68 x 101 cm each

Photo: Gallery Perrotin, Paris. Courtesy Galerie Perrotin, Paris

The audience at play

Both Calle's and Dijkstra's representations of the audience point to a paradigmatic change. By letting the audience speak its words, the enigmatic encounter between audience and artwork is partly mitigated. What is thought and felt is no longer a mystery for the audience looking at the represented audience. Their work is in tune with, or even an exponent of, a culture that is increasingly set on seeing the subjective voice of the audience as a potential. It dialogues with a culture that is increasingly valuing the social construction of meaning, as well as peer exchange. But it does not mean that being misinterpreted does not hold the danger of, as Calle states, suffering on the part of the artist. The desire to be understood or heard, is after all, a basic human condition.

In my exploration of the artistic representation of audiences, I have focussed explicitly on what artists think and feel about the presence of the audience, especially after the 1960s. We have done so because it is a subject that has remained largely unexplored. Other routes towards comprehending these works are evidently available. There are after all, to evoke a Deleuzian thought, a thousand plateaus from which one can relate to a work of art.⁶⁴ To conclude, I will relate some of these findings to acts of self-presentation on social media by audience members visiting the work *For Beginners (all the combinations of the thumb and fingers)* (2010), a video installation Bruce Nauman.



Screaming Kate with Hands, Photograph. Taken on May 19, 2013 and posted on Flickr
Photo: Simon Watt

We see a young girl standing before a large screen showing two hands at both her right and left hand side. The hands appear to be grabbing her, and she screams. The photograph, entitled *Screaming Kate with Hands*, was taken by the girl's father during the exhibition *For Beginners* in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It was posted on the image sharing site Flickr. *For Beginners* is a work wherein Nauman's voice commands what combination of the four fingers and thumb should be shown. The video's image and voice are sometimes out of sync and the hands seem unable to follow the instructions. Failing, a theme often encountered in his oeuvre, is one aspect of the work. It somehow alludes to the desire to control, but also to its impossibility. By photographing the girl screaming and in relation to two hands, restages the work and turns it into a kind of horror-comedy scene. Further observation of visitor photography of this particular work, posted on Flickr, blogs, and other social media websites, shows us that visitors turn *For Beginners* into their own performance.

Screaming Kate with Hands is joined by people who engage in a shadow play in front of the work so that their hands join those in the video. People invent poses that relate the work to fashion, dance, and even to eastern deities with multiple arms. Some pictures are funny, some are more intimate such as the one of a couple holding hands and relating their romantic gesture to the hands in the video. Another girl is photographed in front of the screen at the moment when the hands in the video only raise their middle fingers. These representations show the audience free, at play, uninhibited. *For Beginners* is related to aggression, humor, intercultural dialogue, horror, romance, theater genres, and many other narrative lines of flight that are not in any direct or obvious way suggested by the work itself. The work does not position the visitors as passive witnesses of art but triggers

performative acts of ludic play. Institutionalized behavior, traditional contemplative poses, and attitudes induced by the museum's context and its behavioral codes briefly evaporate, creating opportunities for a multiplicity of subjective bodily responses. What the work makes explicit is that subjective difference – in all its variability and intensity and to a greater or lesser extent - is an unavoidable fact in the experience of art.⁶⁵

At the beginning of the 21st century, artistic representations of the audience show a tendency wherein artistic insight into, and acceptance of, the subjective experience of art meets the lingering desire to communicate in more intentional ways. Audiences, in turn, are discovering their subjective freedom in the encounter with art, increasingly inspired by an art mediation and cultural climate that stimulates open-ended responses to artworks. Their self-presentation speaks of it. Together, these representations form a multifaceted portrait of the contemporary audience for art. It is a multifaceted portrait that is unfinished and that embodies both potential dialogue between its many facets but also conflict and divergence.⁶⁶ Notions such as spectatorship and audience have been more researched within media, cultural, and film studies. Audiences have their own discipline, now, in the form of audience studies. Art history however has, in comparison, dedicated less attention to the audience. This essay's short exploration of the relation between the representation of the audience and questions of artistic intent has aimed at pointing out a research topic – the question of what it means for artists to have an audience – that has not received, and certainly not systematically, much scholarly attention.

The representations I have looked at could also be researched in relation to iconographic traditions within the history of art. Many of the represented audience members we have seen echo poses that have been pictured before in paintings and photographs. I feel that artists' ideas on what it means to have an audience, and their sentiments with regards to the interpretations audiences give to their work, are substantial aspects of the so-called performative turn, wherein artists have become increasingly aware of the presence of the audience. Their ideas have implications for the kind of 'audienship' – in terms of freedom, subjective opportunities, experiential and reflective dimensions - artists try to produce via their work. The representations I have discussed, here – both permanent ones and impermanent ones – provide insight into the representation and communication 'debacle' that seems to have affected art more strongly since the 1960s. Bringing back the voice of the artist in research that looks at the audience and the reception of art produces a theoretical space wherein artists' intentions, their desires to be heard and understood, and to impact or inspire, can co-exist with the audience's freedom to express and create. It creates opportunities to seek out those moments of convergence, dialogue, reciprocal enrichment. After all, is the freedom to express and play not a liberating consequence of Nauman's intentional failure to control and command?

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- ⁵ Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008 - third printing, 2010), 43. Fried seminal critique of minimal art and art that acknowledges the presence of the audience was published in 1967. See: Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in: *Art and Objecthood – essays and reviews*, ed. Michael Fried (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), 1998.
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- ⁸ Idem
- ⁹ Obviously there are many artists today who have many different opinions on the matter. French artist Benoît Maire (°1978) for instance even stated that he likes it when nobody understands what he is doing The artist not only accepts the possibility of not being understood but even seems to like the idea. Benoît Maire quoted in: Huberman Anthony, 'Benoît Maire + Silke Pisano,' *Modern Painters*, Dec. 2008 / Jan. 2009, 60.
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- ¹⁵ We are referring Vasari's book on the lives of artists. Giorgio Vasari, *The lives of the most excellent painters, sculptors and, architects*, transl. Julia Conaway Bondella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Originally published in 1550, Italy.
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- ³³ Claire Gilman, 'Pistoletto's Staged Subjects', *October*, 124 (Spring 2008), 49.
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- ³⁵ Dan Graham, 'Performance: End of the 1960s,' in: *Two-Way Mirror Power – Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art*, ed. Alberro Alexander, (Cambridge Massachusetts, London England: The MIT Press, 1999), 142.
- ³⁶ The performative presence of the artist makes, at first sight, a categorical difference with the presence of an art object. In relation to the audience question under consideration I argue that one can conceptualise this more as a continuum rather than as a categorical difference. Dan Graham stated in the above quoted remark that he temporarily replaced the object. Artist Vito Acconci has made similar remarks. See my exploration of the matter in Patrick Van Rossem, 'The audience as an authorial presence in the creative act. Considering authorship and the performative turn in the 1960s and 1970s,' *Kunstgeschichten der Gegenwart*, 10, (2012), 161-174.
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- ⁴² Bishop, 'Artificial Hells', 12.
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- ⁵² Rancière, 'Emancipated,' 1-23.
- ⁵³ Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, 2010. <http://www.participatorymuseum.org/preface/> Accessed May 17, 2020.
- ⁵⁴ We are referring here to the mediation projects 'THE PILGRIM, THE TOURIST, THE FLANEUR (AND THE WORKER) Play Van Abbe Part 4', which ran from Feb. 26, 2011 until Aug. 14, 2011 and 'Kijkdepot – Living Archive', which ran from Dec. 15 2005 until Nov. 2009. The museum's experimental approach is a topic in Claire Bishop's publication *Radical Museology*. See: Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology* (London: Koenig Books, 2013), 29 – 35 & 55 – 62.
- ⁵⁵ Philip Yenawin, *Theory into Practice: The Visual Thinking Strategies*. Conference talk, presented at the conference of 'Aesthetic and Art Education: a Transdisciplinary Approach.' Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, September 27 - 29, 1999, Lisbon, Portugal. <https://vtshome.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/9Theory-into-Practice.pdf> Consulted May 18 2020.
- ⁵⁶ Irit Rogoff, 'Turning', in: *e-flux*, Nov. 2008. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/00/68470/turning/> Accessed June 10, 2020.

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- ⁵⁷ Tate museum. 'Rineke Dijkstra: I See a Woman Crying,' April 26, 2010. Accessed November 10, 2019. <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/rineke-dijkstra-i-see-woman-crying>
- ⁵⁸ Dijkstra, Rineke, 'A conversation with Rineke Dijkstra.' Interview by Anne-Celine Jaeger. *Popular Photography*, December 17, 2008. <https://www.popphoto.com/how-to/2008/12/conversation-rineke-dijkstra/> Accessed November 12, 2019.
- ⁵⁹ Dijkstra, Rineke, 'Rineke Dijkstra: a retrospective.' Interview by Jennifer Blessing. Guggenheim museum Youtube channel, 2012, video, 09:36. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSAmkX26cdw>
- ⁶⁰ Jennifer Blessing, 'Rineke Dijkstra', 2012.
- ⁶¹ Dijkstra, Rineke, 'Fotograaf Rineke Dijkstra verleid je tot langzaam kijken.' Interview by Marian Cousijn. *De correspondent*, July 7, 2018.
- ⁶² Calle, Sophie, 'He loves me not.' Interview by Angelique Chrisafavis. *The Guardian*, June 17, 2007. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jun/16/artnews.art> Accessed November 5, 2019.
- ⁶³ Joseph Leon Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the subject of landscape* (London: Reaktion books, 2009): 196.
- ⁶⁴ We are referring here to Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's concept 'Mille Plateaux'. See: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie – Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit) 1980.
- ⁶⁵ For a more elaborated analysis of the self-representation of the audience and the importance of audience photography please see my essay on the topic: Patrick Van Rossem, 'Beyond expert vision: visitor photography as inspiration,' in *Museums and Visitor Photography: Redefining the Visitor Experience*, ed. Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert (Edinburgh, UK & Boston, USA: MuseumEtc, 2016), 11 – 37.
- ⁶⁶ Many other artists have represented audience in relation to issues such as expanding and/or unfamiliar audiences, the aesthetic experience and/or artistic intent versus interpretation. One can think of Belgian artist Jacques Charlier's almost ethnographic registrations entitled *Photographies de Vernissage* (1974 – 1975), taken at museums, art galleries and art fairs. Or the ongoing project *Photographs with an Audience* (2008-) wherein American artist Clifford Owens photographs the audience that has participated in his performances wherein he explicitly explores artist – audience relations. Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook 2008 film *Dow Song Duang (The Two Planets Series)* looks in turn at transcultural issues in art interpretation, the social construction of meaning and artistic intent by asking Thai farmers to look and discuss canonical works of European art.