When should we put a name to a picture?

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RESUMO

Este artigo aborda as implicações de dar nomes ou títulos a obras de arte e imagens e como isso interfere na interpretação. Argumenta que nomear uma obra é uma ferramenta para a leitura, especialmente durante o desenvolvimento de teorias intuitivas sobre arte por crianças, tornando-se uma parte positiva no processo de interpretação estética. Apresenta um modo de categorizar a função de nomear a obra. Comenta os resultados iniciais de um estudo empírico, indicando que, para a criança, atribuir um nome para a imagem é tão importante quanto identificar a intenção do artista.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Teorias intuitivas de arte; intitular imagens; interpretação da arte.

ABSTRACT

It is only relatively recently that the Anglophone art-education community started publically to collate its communal body of research. There are at least three ways of getting art students interested in research. I focus on just one of the ways, and note that sometimes it may be most important to name to a picture, as an occasional tool to help visual interpretation. Especially during the development of someone's intuitive theory of art. There is a question about what very young viewers intuitively try to interpret: (a) the meaning of the picture that they see, or (b) the artist's idea of what the picture means. I put forward a way of sorting out a role for naming here: initial results seem to indicate that for young children settling on a name for a picture is as important as identifying an artist's intent. Of course, criteria might change with development, but it is always interesting to look at research into the origins of an intuitive theory of pictures.

KEY WORDS

Intuitive theories of art; naming pictures; art interpretation.

> *"Art may seem to be in danger of being drowned by talk… Probably such a diagnosis is superficial"* (ARNHEIM, 1954, p.1).

There are some aspects of artworks that it might be a mistake to try and talk about. Maybe some matters are best settled just by looking intently at artworks. Remaining silent may be a great help to creative engagement. So in this article we too shall remain silent about matters that are best left just to looking at pictures, and talking about them afterwards. We shall deal only with matters that are usefully talked about in advance of looking at pictures, for that is a way of bringing some issues into the open in a most forceful way. This article concentrates on wherever putting a name to an artwork may become a positive part of the process of communicating pictorial meanings. For present purposes, a name may be regarded as being a very compressed caption.

Giving a name to an artwork was naturally one of the issues that arose in the first comprehensive English-language handbook of research in art education, published in 2004 (Eisner & Day, editors) and amounting to 879 pages of packed text. Whenever a handbook is published, it is always a sign of professional confidence. The editors noted at the outset that 2004 was a very recent date for such an achievement for an educational area, compared with, say, music education or curriculum studies. Better late than never: it was judged to be immensely important that students in art education be helped to become aware of a communal research history that they should be proud of. Perhaps some students think that research should be individual; and they might be wary of research in case their individual creativity becomes hindered by studying collective knowledge. That would be understandable, but it would not be a very helpful viewpoint for them to hold. Could it be the case that some students think that if they were to read research reports and talk about research, the result would be would just be a blanket of words that might suffocate their own productive and creative processes? Some thirty years ago, I came to the conclusion that that was a hypothesis about student resistance to learning about research that was worth looking at. So I did look at the issue, slowly and informally, in the following way.

Background context: approaches to research

During my years as an external examiner for art education courses, over a decade I developed the habit of asking each student whether being on the course had helped them personally in producing their own artwork. Fortunately, each taught course always came out very well from such investigation. From the way the students talked, it was always easy to build up a picture of the efforts made by the staff. So the result of my questioning was that I did not get what I had expected: there was no common picture of research as a suffocating enemy of personal creative diversity. My initial hypothesis seemed to get no support, which was no bad thing. I also developed the habit of asking each student what they thought of art-education research as a common endeavour. Here, I got no unified picture, ever. So what I did get was the impression that students held no common and sustained concept of research as a being a device for building a body of scholarship open to all in art education. As I noted earlier in this article, it took until 2004 for a public handbook to push forward a bold assertion of a relation between education, research and scholarship. Research is a

tool for generating new ideas, for collecting evidence on the outcomes, and for building solidarity between diverse practitioners. One wants to encourage students to value research as a professionally-common tool which is designed to unite knowledge and investigation. How may it be done?

There are many ways of presenting research to students. One way is to encourage discussions of issues separate from students' own productions so as to encourage a perspective untouched by self-interest. That is to say, inspired by the approach taken in all the sciences, research questioning is presented as something interesting in its own right regardless of success and failure in the results. For example, one identifies an aspect of drawing that the students would not be tempted to do in their own productions, and then asks why another group of artists are always tempted to draw consistently oddly. Early examples of such research are in Freeman (1980), and were collected along with others by contributors to Freeman and Cox (1985). Briefly, the artists considered in those publications were young children. Children are perpetually surprising, and nowadays no-one feels apologetic about finding children's drawings interesting and puzzling. A steady stream of books on children's drawings appeared in the nineties onwards. It then became natural to move onto discussing whether we might find ways of adapting research into children's drawings so that it works with aspects of adults' drawings. An author who worked back and forth between the productions of children and of adults was John Willats (1997; 2005). No-one has yet done better than he did in his books at presenting a route into formulating what psychological drawing research can accomplish. Even more pleasingly, he left a few questions about drawing open for discussion and experimental investigation.

A second approach to engaging a class with research is to identify research questions that touch students' own interests. That is the converse of the first approach which tries to keep apart from students' own interests. For example, why is it that in an art-soaked country such as Italy, most people still put "pictorial beauty" at the very bottom of their list of sources of beauty compared with "natural beauty" which they put at the top? Work by Ruggi and Gilli (2008) brought to light that intriguing fact. There are many questions about where the criteria of the viewing public may not match with artists' assumptions. For example, why is it that so many of the viewing public become outraged at some harmless artworks? Are some important legal judgements of

photographs sensible? When might it be perfectly natural for viewers to get something out of viewing experience which the artist had not intended them to feel? Such topics were discussed by Freeman (2004) gathered under the title of *aesthetic reasoning*. The proposal is that amongst the important forms of reasoning that we undertake, aesthetic reasoning is natural to us, and deals with important matters. A recent advance in theorizing how we are enabled to undertake such reasoning has been presented by Bullot and Reber (2013). Their proposal starts with a puzzle: how is it that something puts together (a) a mentality with stable tendencies whose roots go back thousands of years, with (b) art with a history which changes fast and constantly? The authors' solution, which sparked immediate controversy, was to suppose that there is a special way we have of looking at the world, a way they labeled "the design stance". Perhaps it is true that the practice of art that students are invited to join does involve a special way of thinking which is natural to us and which students can feel proud of fostering. Bullot and Reber's fine proposal is not perfect. When they use the term "design stance", they are using a term that is what is philosophically labeled "dispositional". A normal disposition is something that has some endurance and some coherence, and the Bullot–Reber formulation still awaits cross-links being specified as binding together the strands of the stance (FREEMAN and ALLEN, 2013). Still, that just means that there is more work to be done, which is never an unwelcome prospect.

A third way of beginning a discussion of research to start well outside the fields of art and art education. That approach may be thought of as orthogonal to the first two approaches, and it may encounter each of the first two approaches in the course of a discussion. The idea is that we can track how something from outside inevitably gets into art and art education, for better or for worse. The research question is how to understand the nature of that intrusive something, and why it gets in. The educational question is what we might recommend to deal with the intrusion. This third approach is what the rest of this article is about. The intrusion that it centers on is our tendency to put names to things.

How naming gets into the picture

Each of us has an inbuilt need to name things. That fundamental need often shows up clearly in a child's first words before a child is even a year old. Associated with that is an inbuilt need to exchange the names we come up with. Exchanging

names for things is one of the two main ways we develop communicative skills that bind us socially together. The exchange of social-agreement words, such as "hello" and "nice" form the other great way into language. All children come to weld the two ways together in their development. The naming of things plays a gigantic role in every branch of education. Once art education established an identity as a separate strand of education, people came to argue over the way the fundamental need for naming penetrates art and art education. Does naming pictures help or hinder viewers' freedom to interpret what they see? Do artists have a special right to decide what their pictures should be called? Are some titles better than others? Would it be best to make the pictures communicate their meanings for themselves, namelessly? Are captions really nothing more than over-expanded names, or are names just compressed captions? And so on. There is no reason to think that anything will ever put a stop to the debate. Nor should it. The debate brings issues to light in an especially vivid way. Everyone has views about language, and it is particularly easy to sustain discussion. The question is where to start?

One starting point is given by the famous phrase "visual thinking" promoted by Arnheim (1969). Michael Parsons energetically championed the idea that involvement in a particular kind of art thinking requires and promotes "an indivisible interactive combination of visual and linguistic elements" (FREEMAN and PARSONS, 2001, p. 89). A concept of "interpretation" is put at the centre of discussions about how we understand art. A serious viewer of a picture has a sort of responsibility to be willing to undertake an act of interpretation. Sometimes that will be easy to do, sometimes it will be difficult. There is no responsibility laid on the artist to make it as easy as possible for the viewer, but there may well be a bit of responsibility to make it possible for the viewer at least to engage interpretatively with the artwork. These are not mysterious matters. But as the years pass, it seems that both the psychology involved in such matters, and the philosophical aesthetics that underpins analyses, become more and more complex. Periodic simplifications are a good idea. One elegant simplification can be found in a piece by Goodman (1976). Goodman wrote about an imaginary case in which someone puts a name to a picture. The case can be considered from more than one angle, but the following is the simplest angle that serves the present discussion.

Cases of interpretation where naming may get involved

Goodman's case is one of putting a name to an uninterruptable picture. Here, the naming may be presented as the artist's attempt to rise to the challenge of being helpful to a viewer. The reason why the viewer needs help is that the particular picture of Goodman's is very minimalist, little more than a small mark on the picture surface. Giving the photographic mark a name "My black horse" is accurate enough, and Goodman used the example to point out that no question of truth or falsity really arises. To put the matter in the terms used above, what is central is that even with the name being given, the viewer cannot start an act of pictorial interpretation that will make much pictorial progress. In that sense, the artist has been a failure. Sure, we have to add that we can imagine other circumstances in which the artist might be a success. So, there might be a place for that particular a picture and title in the context of an exhibition about the experiences of seeing and knowing. But that just underlines the point that something is missing in merely putting together the uninterpretable picture and the simple title, something outside that particular pair -- such as a context to carry the burden of promoting a viewer's interpretative act. But even that device of adding a context seems to fail to satisfy the analysis of Schier (1986). Schier insisted that a minimal mark simply fails the criterion of functioning as a picture: because the mark fails to display any of the features by which we would normally recognize a real object. In that sense, the mark fails to convey pictorial realism (see Sartwell, 1994). In the present case, no-one who can recognize a black horse can see any distinguishing features in the tiny mark. So in a sense, we could suggest that the picture is to blame for the viewer being becoming disappointed, because the mark is simply too minimalist. I think that Schier's position is immensely useful, and also immensely difficult to use productively. It is in fact easy to think of a situation in which the tiny mark would be perfectly pictorially satisfying. To do that, let us return to a concept of "context" but this time let us imagine a context for the mark within the picture itself. How about adding a few horses, the foreground horses clearly recognizable, and then adding a few more horses which are drawn receding into the distance until the pictorially furthest one or two are just little marks? The marks would gain their satisfying pictorial meaning that becomes carried from the front of the scene to the little marks at the back. That is, communication of the meaning would be a success as long as the viewer co-operates in the interpretation, being willing to accept that distance in the scene is represented

at a price, the price of losing iconicity in the separate marks. And here just a few words given as a compressed caption can play a strongly helpful role in getting a co-operative interpretative process going.

Let us generalize: the suggestion is that it is worth while taking more care over captions and titles than they usually seem to be given by artists. Many titles seem to be given by an artist or a collector merely as a means of labeling artworks in order simply to identify them afterwards. Sure, an identifying function is one of the crucially important functions fulfilled by naming, and the function works well in cases of art-historical importance, such as *Mona Lisa, Rokeby Venus, Night Watch*, and so on. But that identifying-function, necessary though it be, is not sufficient to go anywhere near settling some problems of viewer disagreement and controversy. Names which may perhaps be significant in art history may fall communicatively flat when viewers become upset by artworks. The reason why viewers became upset by Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII* was that the artwork appeared to break some kind of implicit contract which viewers had come to believe in. In presenting *Equivalent VIII* as a finished artwork, the artist had hidden signs of any artistry without communicating what intent was served by that. The artist had hidden the artwork beneath a sample of a real scene of building materials without communicating what intent was served by such a presentation. Indeed, the title *Equivalent VIII* seemed merely to serve an identifying function within the artist's closed world: instead of serving the communicative function wanted in the open world of public viewing. It would be good to understand what is going on in the many cases of controversy, dispute, misunderstanding, disappointment, and outrage that mark the course of art. We need to find out how putting names to artworks has effects within a communicative relation between artist and viewer when things go wrong as well as when things go well (see Freeman, 2004). Perhaps many cases of viewer discontent may be traceable to the act of naming being restricted to serving only an identifying function or only a social function rather than welding the two together as we intuitively do from very early childhood.

Viewers' misunderstandings, disappointments, and outrage have their counterparts in honest misjudgements on the part of artists or curators, as well as in some artists' act of mischief or desire to shock or to put transgression on display. Indeed, we earlier traced this account of naming to Goodman's very mild act of

mischief in displaying an unrecognizable picture which he claimed to be of his horse. Goodman was playing with the idea of deliberately putting a strain on viewers' expectations and willingness to co-operate in an act of interpretation. We noted above that Goodman did not give any systematic consideration to contextual factors. In the latest attempt to work out a model of how artistic judgement might work, Bullot and Reber (2013) built in a process of contextual monitoring. Indeed, they argued repeatedly in their long article that context plays a crucial role in the process of unifying psychological and art-historical accounts to develop what they term a "design stance". One of their examples of the importance of art historical thinking in passing a judgement on a picture, concerns an artist who added a knife-slash to his own picture, intending it to be an integral part of the meaning of the artwork as a whole. If one did not know the artist's intent, and if one did not know some aspects of art history, would one get the picture wrong as a viewer? The answer is "yes". Why would a viewer get it wrong? Because the knife-slash mimics an act of vandalism that might be perpetrated by a very annoyed viewer. I suggest that a key question has to be whether it matters if a viewer misinterprets the picture. After all, there is no reason why an artist should not vandalise his own picture: the number of pictures damaged or destroyed by their own artists must run onto the many thousands by now. Sometimes it is of immense importance to know who damages a picture, and why; and sometimes it is a trivial matter: the picture is damaged and that is that. And that is where the act of naming and captioning comes into its own as an act of artistic communication. A title for an imaginary auto-vandalised picture such as, say, *"Blue poles with knife-slash"* would fulfill the bargain with the viewer which Goodman's imaginary horse was probing. It would put the viewer in the position of starting to make an intelligent interpretation and evaluation of the artwork. The important thing is that the viewer should be enabled to start visual thinking: whether or not the viewer goes beyond the start and carries the act of interpretation to a triumphant conclusion is a very different matter. Here we have been concerned mostly with the starting of an interpretative process.

One objection to all the writing above might be that serious matters have been presented superficially, and trivial issues have been presented solemnly. Does any of it matter in the real world of art education? The answer is that it all does matter immensely when one considers the child-development dimension of art understanding. It is with children that the issues above become urgent in a very simple form. Especially

at the beginning, in preschool children, and towards the end of childhood with adolescence. Adolescents are liable to become particularly judgemental: they may spontaneously regard it as their right to pass one-sided judgement on someone's taste from the pictures displayed in the home (MARIDAKI-KASSOTAKI and FREEMAN, 2000). And the adolescents may get things badly wrong if they lack awareness of contextual pressures and opportunities, such as what display-pieces the neighbours might have on their walls and how much money the person has to spend on pictures for the home. An adolescent rush to judgement was neatly documented by Turner (1983). The rush can only be halted by well-chosen words. In the case noted by Turner, no-one had explained to the adolescent viewers what the term "Fauve" meant. Perhaps if the term had been explained, the adolescents would have understood that what they interpreted as carelessness in the way that Derain had applied colours to the picture surface was a product of the artist intent. And that returns us to the knife-slash instance cited by Bullot and Reber that we noted above. Does a simple appeal to the fact of an artist intent validate an artistic judgement? That is rather a tedious question for philosophical aesthetics, but it is a live problem for young children, and it is still, surprisingly enough, a live issue within one strand of the experimental psychology of picturing, as follows.

Naming and intending

The relation between a picture and an artist's intent is usually analysed as though it were a one-way relation, running from (a) an intent to cause some effect, into (b) the actual effect of the picture. That is, the artist intends something and that intent then explains something of why and how the picture then takes a particular form. So, Goodman intended to take a photograph of his horse and he then stood too far away from the horse. When looking at the picture, the viewers may then intuitively try to put something of their reaction to the picture into words (e.g. something like "It looks like a black horse in the distance so that that explains the appearance of the picture; and explaining the appearance of what I see is what I was trying to do"). But what Bloom and Markson (1998) proposed is that there is a sense in which the process runs in reverse. That is rather than using focusing all our viewing intelligence on interpreting the picture, we also use the appearance of the picture to interpret something of the mind of the artist: "Children might call a picture that looks like a bird 'a bird' not merely

because it looks like a bird, but because its appearance makes it likely that it was created with the intent to represent a bird" (BLOOM and MARKSON, 1998, p. 203). In an attempt to make sense of a world run by others the young children become skilful at seeking out cues to what intentions other people have. In that respect, the picture is just a possible cue to intention. That formulation indeed reverses the usual story in which a statement of intent is a possible cue as to the meaning of a picture.

It is a lovely story: an artist naming a picture tells you something of what you might see in the picture, and seeing something in a picture tells you something of the mental state of the artist. A viewer engaged in an act of interpretation might work backwards and forwards along an intention-appearance track (see e.g. Browne & Woolley, 2001). But the story overlooks one thing. A common way in which we work from what is in the picture to what is in the artist's mind is by putting a name to the picture. And it is no accident that the way in which we work from the artist's mind to the picture is by putting a name to the artist's intent. The name "My Black Horse" is what Goodman used in his brief example of the problem of naming and the problem of appearance. Can we ever separate out the effect of naming from the effect of clarifying an intention? It is not hard to start separating name from intent. Susanna Price, Katie Eaton and I adapted a well-known children's game called "dot-to-dot". We showed four-year-olds some dots on a page and we then drew a continuous line connecting the dots. We then delightedly claimed that we recognized shape that appeared, and we then named it, e.g. "A Mouse", or "A Balloon on a String", whichever was pictorially plausible for that particular picture. We then asked each child each time whether they agreed with the name. They always said yes. We then asked if we could change the name, to e.g. "A Rat" or "A Lollipop on a Stick". Half the children said "no", the name could not be changed. Apparently, once the name had been given, it stuck. Note that the name had been given only after we had done the drawing. So the name could not have labelled any prior intent of our own. Does that take the result out of bounds of the argument of Bloom and Markson? In our study the name is not a cue to artist intention because the name was only given after the picture was finished. Why then did the name stick to the picture? Clearly, giving a name is a powerful event when you are a young child trying to develop your understanding of the world; and developing some theory of the pictorial realm which will not contradict too badly your emerging theory of the world. Why did half the children refuse to let us change the name even

though it was perfectly plausible in pictorial terms, and half the children allow us to change the name? One cannot tell, not from just one study. We need to develop the work, to make it certain that no picture can be seen until the very end of drawing, and that the child accepts our expression of surprise when the drawing is done. And perhaps there is an element of chance in the results, as with all empirical studies. Be all that as it may, it is interesting to see how easily a line of research opens itself. And that is what one wants to share with students.

To end: I am not suggesting that our empirical study was a sort of contest, a test of the power of a statement of intent versus the power of a name. What researchers such as Bloom and Markson and we started to unearth is the way in which the young viewer's search for meaning embraces picture and mind and word. There is no reason at all to think that the child's intuitive theory of pictures becomes any less complex and deep as she develops sensitivity to the role of the artist (see e.g. Callaghan & Rochat, 2003). Viewers bring a rich interpretative stance with them to the world of art. Whilst it is true that in the end all we can do is to stare at a picture and hope that it will speak to us on its own, we cannot stop searching for and picking up all sorts of cues and mental tools along the way. One mental tool is communicatively to share a name with others. Nominal agreement binds our sensibilities together.

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