UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

JOURNALISM AND PLAIN LANGUAGE AS TOOLS TO BRING AUDIENCES CLOSER TO CONTEMPORARY ART

Dissertation submitted to Universidade Católica Portuguesa to obtain a Master's Degree in Culture Studies, specialisation in Management of the Arts and Culture

By

Julia Flamingo

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ABSTRACT

Using complicated language to write about contemporary art is ubiquitous: impenetrable jargon and unintelligible vocabulary are present everywhere, from journalism to curatorial texts, from press releases to exhibition labels. This dissertation examines how complicated language can build barriers between the contemporary art world and the public, making it difficult for audiences to relate to art. However, contemporary art should be accessible to everyone. This dissertation proposes an approach to writing and talking about art that enhances accessibility, empathy, and sensibility. Showing how journalism and plain language can be used as tools to bring contemporary art and the public closer together, this research creates correlations between four broad fields – contemporary art, journalism, language, and mediation. Finally, the platform Bigorna is analyzed as an example. We need more professionals working in favor of the accessibility of contemporary art, and this dissertation shows writers this responsibility is in their hands and within their reach.

Key words: Contemporary art; journalism; cultural mediation; plain language; accessibility

RESUMO

O emprego de linguagem complicada para escrever sobre arte contemporânea está em todo o lado: jargões incompreensíveis e vocabulário indecifrável estão presentes de textos jornalísticos a textos curatoriais, de *releases* de imprensa a legendas de exposição. A presente dissertação investiga como o uso desta linguagem aumenta a distância entre o universo da arte contemporânea e diferentes públicos. Mas, a arte contemporânea deveria ser acessível para todos. Esta pesquisa propõe, então, uma abordagem para falar e escrever sobre arte contemporânea que promova a acessibilidade, a empatia e a sensibilidade. Com o objetivo de mostrar que jornalismo e a linguagem simples podem ser usadas como ferramentas para aproximar a arte contemporânea dos públicos, a presente dissertação cria correlações entre quarto grandes campos do conhecimento: arte contemporânea, jornalismo, linguagem e mediação. Por fim, a plataforma Bigorna é analisada como exemplo. Precisamos de mais profissionais trabalhando em prol da acessibilidade da arte contemporânea, e esta dissertação mostra que criadores de conteúdo podem e devem tomar como sua esta responsabilidade.

Palavras-chave: arte contemporânea; jornalismo; mediação cultural; linguagem simples; acessibilidade

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you, Luísa Santos, for your generosity, precious time, and support.
You have been an essential part of my professional and academic Portuguese life.

Thank you, Sofia, my dear sister. We have the best partnership in life and work.
Let us move forward. Always together!

Thank you, Mom, for everything you have taught me!
Your love for art and how you brought this to us is the beginning of everything.

Thank you, Dad, for always being there for me.

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INTRODUCTION

How difficult is it to understand contemporary art? If contemporary art is art made in our time, why do so many people find it difficult to grasp or to relate to? "It is not for me," one can say. "It is too complicated," could someone add. If it is in the essence of art to question and to discuss, why do we hesitate to ask whether we can touch an artwork or if a given piece is part of an exhibition? Why do so many people prefer to steer clear from art galleries, biennials, and contemporary art venues?

One possible answer to these questions lays in the domain of language. The language used to communicate to audiences about contemporary art can be a bridge. In contrast, it can also be a barrier. It appears that the contemporary art system chooses the latter. Using complicated language to refer to artworks, artists and exhibitions is ubiquitous: impenetrable jargon, abstract sentences, indecipherable quotes, and unintelligible vocabulary are present everywhere, from journalism to curatorial texts, from press releases to exhibition labels. Instead of working in favour of bringing audiences closer to contemporary art, written and spoken texts are, to a large extent, enhancing the distance between them. "As the readership swells and the need for communicative art-writing skyrockets, we notice that – although some art-texts are well-informed, imaginatively written, and genuinely illuminating – much contemporary art-writing remains barely comprehensible" (2014, 9), argues art critic, writer, and academic Gilda Williams.

In response, this dissertation questions how plain language can be used to write and to talk about contemporary art. Hierarchical and complicated language has been used within the contemporary art world in several countries and languages as if it is the only and the right way to talk about contemporary art. Williams describes the issue with using such language to discuss contemporary art: "A common misconception about the inaccessibility of contemporary art can emerge because writers are always wrestling with clear expression – therefore, if art texts seem meaningless so too must be art" (ibid.). This dissertation aims to show that journalism and plain language are tools that can be used to bring contemporary art closer to anyone and everyone.

My motivation to develop this research is bound up with my personal and professional experiences: be it as an art lover or as an art journalist, I cannot stress enough how often I came across unintelligible and indecipherable texts about contemporary art. In 2012, at the age of 21 as an undergraduate student in journalism, I was learning the importance of writing clear and concise texts. The classes were all about exercising the power of plain writing and using accessible language to reach the widest spectrum of audiences as possible. However, this was not what I encountered in the real (art) world.

During that same period, I started to work as an intern at a São Paulo-based office dedicated to communication strategies around art events. My work was primarily to write press releases about events such as the Bienal de São Paulo and the art fair SP-Arte. It did not take me long to realize it was expected that I used an assumed existing model of writing about art. Apart from following rules – protocols that exist in every profession – I was encouraged to use jargon, and replicate confusing parts of curatorial texts and enigmatic quotes from artists. For my texts to be approved internally and then sent to the local media, I had to write in a short amount of time and not be too preoccupied with in-depth information. The press releases were not actually profound or engaging with rich concepts, explanations, and insights, still, the implication was that they should seem complicated from the outside.

I soon understood this was a tendency, that this form of writing intended to make the art world sound like someone worth listening to. I knew it was a way to distinguish the art and the art world by enhancing the distance between what is written and the reader. Those texts were supposed to make us art professionals feel cherished and prioritized. In her book *How to Write About Contemporary Art*, Williams writes:

> "Here's the bad news: stabilizing art through language risks killing what makes art worth writing about in the first place. For this reason, art-writing by definition is a somewhat conflicted and flawed pursuit. Good artwriters accept the paradox of the job, tackling this conundrum head on. Bad art-writing, instead, is unaware of its own precariousness and takes art as a given, a predetermined fixity that requires the embellishment of words to gain significance, which it is not" (2014, 56).

In 2015, I was the art journalist of the most-read magazine in Brazil at the time, Veja São Paulo. I was responsible for the art section of the weekly magazine, and my concerns surrounding the clarity and accessibility of texts became more latent. I was conscious and

critical about how I was going to write texts that would make readers interested in art instead of feeling detached from it. Until then, I felt diminished by the art texts I read because I could not decipher them. I knew a common misunderstanding was to believe the problem is not the text, but the one who is reading it. And I wanted to promote the opposite feeling for my readers. I wanted to show them that if texts about art were readable, so too must be contemporary art. Occupying a post with vast visibility, I very soon turned this into my biggest vocation: writing and talking about contemporary art using plain language, not jargon, and writing for the general public. I wanted to show that contemporary art was for them as well – this continues to be my mission as an art lover and art journalist.

In 2018, I founded a platform dedicated to demystifying contemporary art through journalism coverage and the use of plain language. Titled Bigorna, the Portuguese-spoken project is an online website and social media outlet that comprises of hundreds of texts and videos which talk about contemporary art in a simple way. Bigorna also involves guided tours, talks, and classes. How can journalism and plain language bring contemporary art closer to anyone? This is what I have been asking myself since the beginning. Bigorna is a probing project, a space where I can try different approaches of mediation in relation to contemporary art. Bigorna is the main example of this dissertation, with the aim of bringing practical answers to my research question. There are no similar projects – at least not in the Portuguese language and to the best of my knowledge – whose main objective is to bring contemporary art closer to audiences through journalistic coverage and plain language. This is the gap this research intends to fill.

"There is much writing about writing to be found in the field of literature, and in the field of art we find discussions of related topics such as art history, curating, and the archive, but writing about art writing is relatively uncommon" (2021, 8), write Haylock and Patty in the book *Art Writing in Crisis*.

I believe that there are several ways, and not only one way, to write and talk about contemporary art. I hereby propose an alternative path to the one I have encountered in galleries, museums, and art offices my entire life. This inaccessible language that exists throughout the art world was titled *International Art English* by Alix Rule and David Levine, authors of the eponymous essay published by Triple Canopy in 2012. The

American writers wanted to understand why it is so commonly difficult to read texts about art, therefore they assembled and analyzed thirteen years of press announcements to defend their hypothesis that International Art English is a language used by the entire art community. This topic will be thoroughly discussed in Chapter 2.

The problem with this language is that International Art English positions itself as a hegemonic language for writing about art. It is not only in English-speaking countries that people claim that contemporary art "is not for me". This happens all over the world and beyond the borders of English-speaking countries, which leads us to believe that International Art English rules what is written about contemporary in many different places in the world. It is a convention born in English which is used in different languages and shapes what is understood as standard practice in art writing. This dissertation is written in English firstly because I am talking about accessibility in language, and therefore I can reach more people. Secondly, because existing research about art writing are mostly in English or pervade International Art English. They are an important part of the literature review of this research.

One of the reasons why contemporary art is perceived as 'difficult to understand' is because texts about it build barriers. I believe there is a way language can be used to build bridges between the contemporary art world and audiences. With this dissertation, I propose another approach to art writing, which enhances accessibility, empathy, sensibility, and approximation.

Titled "Contemporary Art", the first chapter of this dissertation takes as a starting point the most famous urinal in (art) history, the artwork *The Fountain* (1917) by Marcel Duchamp, to contextualize and explain a milestone in the birth of conceptual art, and make it clear what I mean when I refer to contemporary art. By selecting a pre-existing mass-produced object with no obvious aesthetic merit, presenting it in a completely different context from which it is usually found, with a new approach and angle, and giving it a name as well as the status of a work of art, Duchamp went against every convention of what was known of art until then, and his proposals permeate what can be understood as contemporary art today.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that when it comes to finding meaning in contemporary art, there is no master language to learn and reproduce, only tools that help to build vocabulary and repertoire. It changes and evolves at the same time everything else is changing in the world. Books that explain contemporary art in a simple way are important references for this research, such as *What Are You Looking At?: 150 Years of Modern Art in the Blink of an* Eye by William Gompertz, *Who's afraid of Contemporary Art?* By Kyung An and Jessica Cerasi*, and Playing to the Gallery: Helping Contemporary Art in Its Struggle to Be Understood* by Grayson Perry. In their books, the authors acknowledge the challenges to understanding and engaging with contemporary art. They present a range of ideas about why this can happen and play an important role in explaining it to curious readers, all while making use of plain language. I believe they have greatly contributed to the demystification of the art world.

> "If interpreting art is integral to making art, then the question of how to teach interpretation needs to be addressed. […] Approaching the process of interpretation with a toolkit of thinking skills is particularly useful with regard to contemporary visual art, in which meanings can be contradictory, multiple and are certainly open-ended and unstable," explain the authors of Contemporary Art and The Role of Interpretation (Charman & Ross, 2004).

They defend that the notion that works of contemporary visual art can have multiple interpretations is the alternative to the traditional approach to understanding an art work. To them in this process of interpretation and understanding, it is important to focus on the "construction of meaning from a range of propositions which between them inform a process of critical engagement." (ibid.).

Titled "Language in Art Writing", Chapter 2 of this dissertation focuses on one of the reasons why contemporary art can be difficult to understand: language. Other reasons such as physical accessibility, representation, or financial access go beyond the scope of this dissertation. My thesis is that language can be an obstacle for audiences to approach the contemporary art world. For some people inside this small circle, difficult language is used to differentiate this hermetic group of people from non-art world people. This has been thoroughly studied by Alix Rule and David Levine, who have published the impactful essay *International Art English* (2012).

International Art English, an unclear and unapproachable language, is used globally for art writing intending to consecrate artworks, artists, exhibitions, and art events as significant, critical and, indeed, contemporary. It positions itself as a hegemonic language for writing about art. British linguist Roy Harris refers to this language as Artspeak. He explains it as the discussion of art loaded with political, educational, and social terms directly related to its context that has been a locus of controversy for most of its long history. This chapter analyses the language used in the art world, as well as the relationship between this language and power. From my point of view, writers, curators, journalists, interns, and others who write about contemporary art can change this logic if they start writing about art with the use of plain language.

In Chapter 3, "Plain Language to Talk about Contemporary Art", I discuss the role of art writing in bringing contemporary art closer to audiences. Writing and talking about contemporary art is established as a mediator between artists, artworks, exhibitions, art venues, and audiences. It performs the important function of interpretation, explanation, and adding layers of information. Depending on its objective and clarity, art writing can also be a tool for accessibility, which in this case means using language as a facilitator and a disseminator. Art is a tool for empathy and so is language. Therefore, in this chapter, I investigate how clear, uncomplicated, and simple language, be it written or spoken, can be used in favour of bringing contemporary art and audiences closer together.

"Developing a vocabulary in literary, conversational, or creative diction is an opportunity for empathy and connection within cultural communities and spaces," writes Cara Ober (2019, 4):

> "Skilled art writing offers opportunities to rigorously examine who we are as individuals, communities, and collectively, to serve as a fertile ground for understanding, relationships, and growth. You don't have to have an art history degree to look critically and write about art colorfully, personally, emotionally, or controversially, but you do need to envision the variety of reader you would like to build relationships with" (ibid., 6).

I defend the notion that it is possible to write about contemporary art in plain language in any language. I bolster this argument with examples such as the PLAIN association, present in more than 30 countries and 15 different languages, which promotes plain communication in *any* language, not just English. Taking this into consideration, in

Chapter 4, I defend the idea that, as good storytellers, journalists can play the role of mediators of contemporary art. Titled "Journalism as a Mediation Tool for Contemporary Art", this chapter presents the values of literary journalism. On the one side, it is attained to facts and is committed to telling a true story, and on the other side, it uses emotions and storytelling to closely engage audiences with the content. As they are producing content, telling stories, editing facts, shedding light on this or that side of the facts, and even sharing opinions, journalists play different parts at once, including one of mediators.

Therefore, this chapter discusses cultural mediation, referring to acknowledged scholars in the field such as Brazilian professor and researcher Cayo Honorato, who explores how that cultural mediation happens not only internally within art venues but also transversally to them. This bolsters my argument that journalists, by talking and writing about contemporary art outside art venues, can bring new audiences to art spaces. They play a complimentary and "extra-institutional" role.

About the importance of cultural mediation in society, professor and digital mediation expert Florian Wiencek argues: "Artistic products and cultural artifacts reflect and therewith can teach people about our their and other cultures, societies, and history. Learning to engage with them trains people to critically reflect the world they live in and learning about the different modes of cultural production develops their own ability to express themselves, but also enables them to form their environment, their society, their culture" (2019, 98).

Finally, I present the example of this dissertation in Chapter 5. Titled "Bigorna, a didactic platform for contemporary art", the chapter analyses the platform for contemporary art which I founded in April 2018. Over the last five years with Bigorna, I have been experimenting with the use of plain language to bring contemporary art and audiences closer together. The platform comprises of a website, an Instagram profile, and a YouTube channel, as well as on-site guided tours and talks. Texts and videos that make use of transparent and uncomplicated language are published regularly, with the aim to explain artworks, artists, art expressions, the dynamic of venues and markets, and specific concepts, among other subjects. On Bigorna, content is written and spoken in Portuguese, my mother tongue. Plain language is therefore used in Portuguese to talk about

contemporary art because there are no similar productions in Brazil, my home country, and Portugal, the country where I live.

Over the last few years, Bigorna has been a hands-on experiment: my goal is to produce written and oral content that is completely understandable for the first-time reader and advocates for accessible, free, and in-depth content. In this research, I analyse what has been done to bring practical examples to my hypothesis.

With the goal to prove that journalism and plain language are tools that have the potential to bring contemporary art and the public closer together, I adopted the methodologies of literature review and the exposition of a practical example in this dissertation, both of which I try to present in a clear language and, in most parts, using storytelling to articulate theories with field work. For each one of the four broad fields in this research – contemporary art, journalism, language, and mediation – I present a relevant bibliography to create correlations between these different fields.

At one point in this research, I decided to do interviews with cultural mediators to investigate their opinion on whether journalism is a mediation tool for contemporary art. I soon understood that there was no novelty in these interviews: to them, it is already a fact that journalism is a mediation tool. Taking into consideration that this form of qualitative research was not adding information to this dissertation, I was reassured that focusing on a literature review to create connections between the different fields in this research would bring more in-depth arguments to my hypothesis than proceeding with these interviews.

For the second methodology used, the analysis of our example, Bigorna, I apply the literature review and theory presented in the four first chapters of this dissertation to a practical example. I also intend to have a critical approach to my practice as a journalist. First and foremost, this project will hopefully serve as an example for other journalists, writers, critics, students, bloggers, and art lovers who wish to write and talk about art in a simple way. My objective with this analysis is to provide practical examples to support my research and hypothesis that journalism and plain language are mediation tools for contemporary art.

Similar claims were pointed out by scholars in the English language; however, to the best of my knowledge, no research investigates the correlation between language, journalism, contemporary art, and mediation as it is done in this dissertation. Bringing together these fields shines a light on the fact that writing and talking about contemporary art with deepness does not mean being incomprehensible, enigmatic, or unintelligible. Being simple is not the same as being simplistic. This dissertation defends that in-depth content about contemporary art can be developed with the use of plain language. This idea goes against the common belief that difficult language helps to sustain the relevance of art.

Some recent studies and how-to guides in English have repeatedly shown difficult language is a barrier between audiences and the contemporary art world. Against this backdrop, this thesis discusses how this also happens in the Portuguese language and not only in English, setting this thesis apart from other works done on this topic. This dissertation sheds new light on the fact that there is no such thing as the right way to talk and write about contemporary art. There are countless approaches to it, and considering empathy, transparency and plain writing can allow anyone to engage with the text and therefore engage with art. When covering contemporary art, generosity can help to demystify it.

There is a much-needed updated and nuanced discussion on the hermeticism of the contemporary art world to be had, and this dissertation highlights that language works in favour of the impenetrability of the contemporary art world. On one hand, this investigation alerts writers to the importance of paying attention to how they write and talk about art with the public. On the other hand, it reassures broader audiences that contemporary art is for them as well, not only for professionals and art lovers who already belong to this world.

Art helps create bonds between people. It creates empathy for other ways of living and reality, promotes sensibility to other ways of living and experiences, brings people from different spectrums of society together, promotes democracy, and triggers critical and healthy discussions. “Art can speak to us, in some special, direct way, about our own experience of living in the present time, of belonging to it, of being contemporary,” writes Terry Smith (2011, 9):

> "Such feelings of something significant being shared (of belonging to our times) can be vivid, even – perhaps especially – in cases where we recognize that the work we are looking at has been made by someone with a different perspective on the world today: he or she may be from another country or culture, of a different gender or sexuality, or from an older or younger generation. Nevertheless, a sense of coexistence, or contemporaneousness, is present: we are all in these times together, however differently" (ibid.).

To Kester (2011, 42), "A work of art trains us for social interactions that we aren't yet prepared for in real life."

In a more personal and emotional tone, Lance Esplund defends that art is an individual expression of one one more artists that connects human beings because it promotes an universal experience:

> "An artwork, after all, is not just there to highlight and to heighten the artist's own experience any more than it is there merely to reaffirm the individuality of the artist or the viewer; it is there to heighten all experience—both private and shared, both the individual experience and universal experience. In this way—through the specific, charged, deep, and private experience of one artwork—viewers get closer, if they're honest, to feeling what others feel. They get closer not just to art and to poetry and to the artist, but to other people, to what it means to think and to feel deeply, not just alone, but as a community. The private experience of art opens us up to the larger experience of seeing, feeling, thinking, reflecting, and living in other times and cultures. The more deeply "one engages with art—even when alone, face to face with a single work of art—the more deeply one engages with life and with what it means to be human." (Esplund 2018, 109)

To Rosalind Krauss, conceptual art has put the relationship between human beings and their context in the spotlight:

> "It was the extraordinary ambition of post-Abstract-Expressionism to take this notion of 'forms of life' seriously: to make an art devoted to the way the human subject is a function of his ambience, his culture, his media bombardment, his promiscuous reading, his vicariousness. In a movement that began with Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, the generation of the 1960s made an art of the human subject turned inside out, a function of space-at-large, the setting, the siting, the impress of everything outside that once-sacred virtual space of art that had been the 'inside' of the pictorial space, the 'inner being' of the sculptural one." (Krauss 1986, 24).

As we will see over the next chapters, contemporary art helps us to understand and change our reality. Contemporary art offers us so much, and this dissertation defends the bringing broader audiences closer to it.

The value this research also brings to the broader field is the understanding that contemporary art is not as difficult as one can say it is. By indicating that one of the reasons people are afraid of contemporary art is because of the language used to refer to it, this dissertation indicates a problem and points to resolutions. Methods and approaches presented in this dissertation can be used by other writers, journalists, critics, interns, curators, and any other art professional to engage audiences with their text – and therefore with contemporary art. We need more people working in favour of the accessibility of art, and this dissertation shows writers this responsibility is in their hands, and within their reach.

Seeing the world through the lenses of art is a path for empathy, sensibility, and proximity. Art is a tool for us to better understand ourselves and the world around us. The next chapters of this dissertation defend the notion that contemporary art can be for anyone. Let us start with the birth of contemporary art explained in a very simple way. I hope that, by the end of this dissertation, you will be convinced that simple language can bring contemporary art closer to audiences and that art can have a transformative role in your life the way it has been changing mine.

1. CONTEMPORARY ART

1.1 Is this art?

The story is well known. Chances are, you have already heard at least something about the most famous urinal in history. Even so, it is worth giving *The Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp more attention. After all, the urinal is regarded as a milestone in the birth of contemporary art.

"It has gone on to become the single most influential artwork created in the twentieth century. The ideas it has embodied directly influenced several major art movements, including Dada, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and Conceptual Art. Marcel Duchamp is unquestionably "the most revered and referenced artist among today's contemporary artists" (2012, 50), writes William Gompertz in the first chapter of the book *What Are You Looking At?: 150 Years of Modern Art in the Blink of an Eye*. The vivid and passionate narrative at the beginning of the book by Gompertz — the Artistic Director of the Barbican Centre and a former BBC arts editor — takes *The Fountain* as a starting point to illustrate and demystify the 150 years of (western) art history explained in its following nineteen chapters. Acknowledging the skillful approach Gompertz uses to explain art history to laypeople, and taking in consideration that contemporary art is the main subject of this research, Duchamp's *The Fountain* will be thoroughly analyzed in the next pages. To the analysis will help to contextualize and explain the history and development of contemporary art as a concept and to understand what the term means today, and what it means for me.

In April 1917, the French artist Marcel Duchamp bought a urinal and took it to his studio in New York. He turned it upside down, then signed and dated it in black paint "R. Mutt 1917" on its left-hand side. Duchamp decided that it was a work of art, titled it *Fountain*, and sent it to the 1917 *Independents Exhibition*. He did not only turn the urinal upside down but, as mentioned above, the entirety of art history. As written on Artforum magazine, "The first annual exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists opened at the Grand Central Palace in New York City on the evening of April 10, 1917. Thousands

gathered to celebrate what was to be the largest art exhibition ever held in New York—almost twice the size of the famous Armory Show four years earlier. This First Independents' Exhibition […] contained some 2,500 works of painting and sculpture, by 1,200 artists, from 38 states." (Naumann, 1979, 1)

Figure 1 – *The Fountain* (1917), by Marcel Duchamp (© Succession Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2023)

The largest show of modern art that has ever been mounted in America was organized by the Society of Independent Artists, a group of forward-thinking intellectuals who were making a stand against what they perceived to be the National Academy of Design's conservative attitude towards art. Marcel Duchamp was himself a member of the Society of Independent Artists' organizing committee. Alongside the board, the committee decided that any artist could become a member of the Society for the price of six dollars and the right to enter up to two works.

When the *Fountain* was delivered to the Grand Central Palace exhibition, the general feeling was that Mr. R. Mutt, the pseudonym Duchamp used to sign the artwork, was making fun of the Society of Independent Artists. Which, indeed, he was. Duchamp was challenging his colleagues and daring them to fulfill the ideals that they had collectively set out, which was the progressive set of principles that any work by any artist would be accepted in the exhibition.

> "The lively press coverage of the affair centered on the conflict between the stated aims of the Independents – that any artist paying the entry fee (a mere six dollars) was free to exhibit – and the complaints of the members of the committee that the object in dispute was indecent, or, in the opinion of at least one of them, Duchamp's friend Katherine Dreier, 'unoriginal'" (Ades, Cox and Hopkins 2021, 170).

The members considered it offensive and vulgar on the grounds that it was a urinal, and above all, disrespectful to art – to them, it, since for the committee members that was not art but a day-to-day object turned upside down. And so, *The Fountain* was not displayed.

> "During the installation of the exhibits for the independents' show, a white porcelain urinal appeared on a black pedestal in the storeroom, submitted by Richard Mutt. An emergency meeting of available directors was held and Mr. Mutt's defenders were outvoted by a small margin. The object was not exhibited and temporarily disappeared. Duchamp immediately resigned from the hanging committee in protest" (ibid.).

The identity of Mutt was not revealed to the general public at this stage – and it is not clear exactly when it was. No one knows what happened to the artwork, and the only surviving documentation was a photograph by Alfred Stieglitz, which probably depicted another version of the work.

The reverence with which *Fountain* is now treated would probably have amused Marcel Duchamp. His decision to choose a urinal was not unintentional. Conversely, he chose it for the lack of aesthetic appeal, something he called 'anti-retinal'. "Duchamp's repudiation of what he called 'retinal' painting designed to appeal purely to the eye," explains James Hall in *The Two Duchamps* (Tate 2017). The Art Story Website explains that "Duchamp rejected purely visual or what he dubbed "retinal pleasure," deeming it to be facile, in favor of more intellectual, concept-driven approaches to art-making and, for that matter,

viewing." (The Art Story, n.d.) He claimed his artworks to be the opposite of this, therefore 'anti-retinal'.

Its utility is nothing more than a sanitary object often provided in public toilets for male users, which means it is an elementary object that hardly garners attention apart from its practical use: "It would be senseless to argue about their beauty or ugliness, firstly because they are beyond beauty and ugliness, and secondly because they are not creations but signs, questioning or negating the act of creation" (Paz 2011, 54). The urinal is a critique of the concept of 'taste', which has been profoundly connected to art production throughout Western art history. Duchamp wanted to go beyond the question of beauty in art, to free the art object of the subjective matter of beauty/ugliness: "The Readymade confronts this insignificance with its neutrality, its no significance. For this reason, it cannot be a beautiful object, or agreeable repulsive, or even interesting" (Ibid., 60).

By turning it upside down, taking away its function, and giving it the status of a work of art, Duchamp appropriated the urinal – which later on would ironically become a masterpiece.

> "Mr. Mutt did three things: he chose the object, gave it a new title (by calling it *Fountain* it becomes a type of decorative, monumental object, and, moreover, the direction of flow is theoretically reversed in that a fountain projects, while a urinal receives, liquid) and a new point of view (one might say, perspective) by tilting it on to its back" (Ades, Cox and Hopkins 2021, 171).

This is the first example of 'Appropriation Art' ever known – a concept which today is commonplace in contemporary art. According to Marina P. Markellou, "appropriation is a relatively common art practice that was theoretically legitimized by Marcel Duchamp, who is considered to be the father of appropriation practice with his 'ready-mades' at the beginning of the 20th Century" (2013, 145).

Duchamp called the sculpture a 'Readymade', another imperative concept and jargon frequently used in the contemporary art vocabulary. By selecting a pre-existing mass-produced object with no obvious aesthetic merit, presenting it in a completely different context than it is usually found, with a new approach and angle, and giving it a name as

well as the status of a work of art, Duchamp was going against every convention of what was known of art until then. "With characteristic simplicity, Duchamp once described a 'readymade' as a 'work of art without an artist to make it'. In principle, the readymades are mass-produced objects that have been signed and sometimes inscribed by the artist" (Ades, Cox and Hopkins 2021, 128). In the text "The Readymades of Marcel Duchamp", Steven Goldsmith explains:

> "Put simply, if a toilet or a bottlerack can provide rewarding formal satisfaction, anything can. Art, as a privileged, isolated category, no longer exists. As a vehicle for communication of ideas, however, the readymade reaffirms the traditional art world. The found object is art because an artist of special sensibility felt he could convey an important aesthetic idea through it" (1983, 198).

The urinal itself had more things to say. Turned upside down, it did not take much to see the sexual connotations of an erect penis. "He specifically chose a urinal because as an object it has plenty to say, much of it erotic, an aspect of life that Duchamp frequently explored in his work" (Gompertz 2012, 46). Moreover, "the name Mutt plays with Mott, the store from which he bought the urinal" (Ibid., 43). Plenty of other interpretations and explanations emerged over the last century. For their part, Jack Burnham and Rosalind Krauss have proposed that "R. Mutt" may be read as homonym of the German word 'Armut', meaning poverty (1972). Was he saying that art was impoverished at the time, or that art could be made out of anything, even out of an inferior object? Probably both. Another plausible narrative for the pseudonym is that Duchamp was referring to *Mutt and Jeff*, a daily comic strip that had been published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* since 1907. In its story, the character A. Mutt was motivated by greed and compulsion to gamble. This interpretation means that Duchamp could have been criticizing the greedy and speculative approach collectors and museum directors had towards art (Ibid., 48).

In the light of this handful of interpretations, a colorful discussion can be proposed on what Duchamp was questioning in regards to the work of art with this revolutionary act. His ideas permeate everything that it is understood as contemporary art today.

Firstly, Duchamp wanted to question the very notion of what constituted a work of art.

> "The Readymades stand as criticism not of the art of the past, but of works of art, ancient or modern, insofar as they are considered as objects. This is exactly what sets him against all modern art. For Duchamp, there is no art in itself: art is not a thing but a medium, a cable for the transmission of ideas and emotions" (Paz 2011, 82).

Academics and critics were the only ones validating works of art at that time (today, other gatekeepers such as galleries, auction houses, institutions, and curators give value to artworks; as well as audiences with their cellphones). Duchamp saw those academics and critics as self-elected and unqualified people. To him, the ones who should decide what was and what was not a work of art should be artists themselves. In his view, if artists create a work of art, create meaning for it, and influence the context it is in that is enough to call it a work of art. Just because scholars have studied art does not mean that they must be the ones setting boundaries for what art is or is not. These limits could and should be challenged by artists themselves – until there are no limits.

The answer to the vital question whether the readymades were works of art depends on how art itself is understood. Duchamp responded to this question in his BBC radio interview from 1959:

> "Alright, can we try to define art? We have tried, everybody has tried and in every century there is a new definition of art […] So if we accept the idea of trying not to define art, which is a very legitimate conception, then the readymade can be seen as a sort of irony, because it says here it is, a thing that I call art, I didn't make it myself. As we know art etymologically speaking means to 'make', 'hand make', and there instead of making, I take it readymade. So it was a form of denying the possibility of defining art" (Ades, Cox and Hopkins 2021, 136)

Secondly, the only medium traditionally accepted as works of art until then were sculpture and painting. According to European academic traditions dating back to Greco-Roman art history, these mediums defined 'Fine Arts'. Canvas, marble, wood, and stone were the materials artists would work with. Suddenly, Marcel Duchamp appeared with a porcelain urinal.

Furthermore, by using a porcelain urinal and not a marble sculpture in *Fountain*, Duchamp was signaling that it that he could only express his ideas by means of a porcelain urinal. For Duchamp, the idea was more important than the medium the artist uses. This means

that only after an artist had developed a concept, would he or she be able to choose how it was going to be expressed. Duchamp was inverting the order of art-making: traditionally, the medium would dictate to an artist how he or she would go about making a work of art (Gompertz 2012, 50).

If ideas come first, if the concept is more important, then any material could become art, regardless of its final shape. The term 'Conceptual Art' was born in the 1960s out of this belief. Sound, light, performance, video, photography, happenings, art in the streets, in the nature and in the public realm – everything can be considered artwork, even if there are no physical art objects. "Nonvisual must not be confused with nonvisible", explains John Chandler in the text *The Dematerialization of Art* (1971, 77).

In the text *A Theory of Conceptualism,* Robert Bailey explains that three approaches proved to be the most enduring and influential accounts of conceptual art (2017). The first is by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, who call the conceptual art movement:

> "the dematerialization of art […] The shift of emphasis from art as product to art as idea has freed the artist from present limitations – both the economic and technical […]. The artist as thinker subjected to none of the limitations of the artist as maker can project a visionary and utopian art that is no less art than concrete works." (Lippard and Chandler 1971, 18).

Artist Sol Lewitt, one of the most important voices of conceptual art proposed that "ideas alone can be works of art" and "all ideas need not to be physical" (Bailey 2017, 8). As Bailey puts it, "for him, 'the idea [or] concept is the most important aspect' of a conceptual artwork, and he reduced the actual making of the object to a 'perfunctory affair'" (Ibid.). The third approach by artist Joseph Kosuth was rather philosophical, since he considered the movement to be an "inquiry into the foundations of the concept 'art'. […] For Kosuth, the value of an artist can be weighted according to how much artists questioned the nature of art" (ibid.). Following this idea, art can be everything, everywhere. Nonetheless this proposition not widely accepted by the general public. The belief that works of art have to be objects (or products) created by artists is still pervasive.

Artists were commonly perceived as geniuses (or mentally ill in the case of artists such as Van Gogh)[1] with exceptional intelligence and insight who had the gift of wisdom and sensibility: "There was another widely held view that Duchamp wanted to expose as bogus: that artists are somehow a higher form of human life" (Gompertz 2012, 45). It was a popular belief that they were hermits who would rather stay alone in their studio and the artworks they produced were close to miracles. For Duchamp, this idea was incorrect and was virtually nonsense. Artists are not a special group of people, but normal people with regular needs and good ideas. Again, more than a century later, this (mis)conception still exists.

Just as importantly, his readymades made it clear that artists did not have to create something with their bare hands to be considered artists. A stone did not have to be transformed into a sculpture, or a blank canvas did not necessarily have to be painted with ink for its creator to be considered an artist. An artist does not have to be an artisan who does manual work. One could also appropriate him/herself with existing objects in the world.

1.2 Why does it matter?

Today, it can still be a very challenging idea for those viewing a sculpture made of lead inside a plant, like *The Matter of Time* (1994-2005), to accept the fact that this is a work of art. The sculpture permanently installed at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is an example of a contemporary art installation by Richard Serra. The well-known American artist is one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century, not only because his lead sculptures can weigh hundreds of tons but also because his works create spaces in the world. His large-scale steel installations constitute landscapes, and change the perception

[1] As defended by Pedro Mota, creativity related to art is one of the few, if not the only, areas in which mental ilness is socially perceived in a different way. "The notion that creativity is in some way related to the presence of psychiatric disorders is taken as axiomatic in modern Western culture, and the representation of madness in different forms of art has been socially glorified almost in a mystical way. Although creativity is an essential element in certain professions, the presence of neuropsychiatric pathology has been particularly prevalent among many artists over the centuries." (2021, 139)

of the human gaze into the world. They make us confront our bodies by challenging the experience we have with architecture, space, and scale. As Laura Rosenstock explains:

> "Serra's works involve the viewer in this creative, exploratory process. They heighten perceptual awareness and virtually force interaction. They compel the viewer to confront his experience and perception of them in relation to both space and time and to focus on their physical properties and the manner in which they were created. All Serra's sculptures are concerned with what can actually be experienced and observed. Some reveal the process of their making, some clarify aspects of their physical properties, and others redefine the nature of the space they occupy. It is only in tracing these interactions, in "working" to understand the pieces, that they become fully comprehendible and meaningful." (Rosenstock 1986, 11)

This example illustrates the fact that art does not necessarily talk about art. Rather it talks about us and the world. It helps humans expand the way we, as individuals, see and experience our reality. "The role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real" (Bourriaud, 1998, 5) writes Nicolas Bourriaud in his book *Relational Aesthetics*.

Figure 2 – *The Matter of Time* (1994-2005), by Richard Serra (Guggenheim Bilbao Museo/ © 2018 Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

For Bourriaud, meaning in what he calls 'relational artworks' is interpreted collectively and socially, rather than intimately or individually. This collective interpretation helps

catalyse social change. Claire Bishop respects but contests this idea when she talks about antagonism: for her, while all relations which produce "dialog" are automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good, she argues that it is an overly-utopian and simplified goal to understand art as a democratic tool. Antagonism, conflict, division, and instability promoted by artworks do not ruin the democratic public sphere, but are conditions of its fully functioning existence. "If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what *types* of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?" (Bishop2004,65).

Contemporary art is a mirror, an echo, and a response to the context in which we find ourselves. It is related to social, cultural, political, economic, environmental, ethical, and religious concerns of our times, amongst many others. It changes and evolves at the same time everything else is changing in the world. There is the reason why it so challenging to define what contemporary art is. Lance Esplund give different interpretations on contemporary art as he writes:

> "Some panelists argued that contemporary art began with Pop art or Conceptualism or Postmodernism; or circa 1945, or 1970; or that it could only include art made since 1990, or 2000. One person suggested that a contemporary artist was anyone born since 1950. Another said that a work of contemporary art, by definition, must have been completed "today," or maybe "yesterday"—and by someone under the age of thirty. Even more recently, I encountered the idea that today's most important contemporary artists don't necessarily make art objects at all; rather, they are closer to first-responders and activists, resorting, when and if necessary, to guerrilla tactics in order to address emergency crises, assist victims of natural disasters, counter social injustice, or instigate change." (Esplund 2018, 19)

Art has amazing power to lend us lenses to see the world from other points of view. It allows us to put ourselves in someone else's shoes, because it shows how other people live, think, exist and perceive the world: "Art can speak to us, in some special, direct way, about our own experience of living in the present time, of belonging to it, of being contemporary," writes Terry Smith (2011, 9).

Smith points out that contemporary artworks can provoke implicit or explicit feelings that give a sense that we are all coping, however individually, with the same set of circumstances.

> "Such feelings of something significant being shared (of belonging to our times) can be vivid, even—perhaps especially —in cases where we recognize that the work we are looking at has been made by someone with a different perspective on the world today: he or she may be from another country or culture, of a different gender or sexuality, or from an older or younger generation. Nevertheless, a sense of coexistence, or contemporaneousness, is present: we are all in these times together, however differently. We are, in a word, contemporaries" (ibid.).

In most cases, this empathy through art is generated unconsciously or without logical reason because it stirs emotions and senses rather than appealing to rational thought. So much about contemporary art centers around provocation, challenge, and disrupting expectations. It is about liking what you see not only because it is beautiful, but liking it because it is relevant, consistent, and canny. It can open up possibilities for us to better understand our own existence. "Artistic practice is always a relationship with the Other, at the same time as is represents a relationship with the world", writes Bourriaud (1998, 11). To him, "every work of art has the ability to produce sense of human existence (and point to possible trajectories) within the chaos called reality" (ibid., 13).

The book *Who's Afraid of Contemporary Art* by Kyung An and Jessica Cerasi, is an A to Z guide to the art world that uses plain language and sharp examples. It answers apparently basic however crucial questions to introduce the universe of contemporary art in layman's English. On the importance of art, they write:

> "By inviting us to contemplate and reflect on the world we live in and the issues we face, today's contemporary art possesses an acute social conscience. There are more artists working with social issues than ever before, responding to the ways our present is shifting. As the world moves forward, our opinions evolve and our outlooks change, so too does 'contemporary' art" (An and Cerasi 2017, 19).

If contemporary art talks about the world, it can be much easier to understand than many people tend to think it is. Understanding an artwork does not need to be an academic reception of fact and explanation. Because there is inherently room to question and formulate the legitimacy of contemporary art, an understanding of art can be found in the desire to speak, discuss, and even ask why something is art and in making an effort to answer that question for yourself. The attempt to create bridges between art and context is in itself an exercise of making sense of the world.

As Douglas Crimp discusses conceptual art, minimalism and the work of Richard Serra, he defends:

> "When site specificity was introduced into contemporary art by Minimal artists in the mid-1960s, what was at issue was the idealism of modern sculpture, its engagement of the spectator's consciousness with sculpture's own internal set of relationships. Minimal objects redirected consciousness back upon itself and the real-world conditions which ground consciousness. The coordinates of perception were established as existing not only between the spectator and the work but among spectator, artwork, and the place inhabited by both." (In Krauss 1986, 41).

So what are some of these bridges between art and context?

> "The inclusion of context—relevant situations, events, people, and relationships—constitutes an attempt to step outside the bounds of the museum, to recover art in life. Artists import other contexts into the museum and, vice versa, walk out of the cultural context of the museum and into the expansive sphere of social life.", explains theorist and artist Lan Tuazon in her text *What's in it for me? Radical Common Sense in Art and Education* (2012, 34).

Art can give visibility to the socially marginalized, raise ecological concerns, and attack systems of political and economic power. In his text about contemporaneity and art, Terry Smith says:

> "The notion of contemporaneity, understood in this expansive sense, pinpoints the dynamic at work between the many factors usually adduced as predominant explanations of what shapes the contemporary world: Modernity, globalization, neoliberalism, decolonization, fundamentalism, terrorism, network culture, and global warming, among many others less prominent but just as profound, such as indigenization."

All these are ongoing processes, feeding our present context that is in constant change. "The work of contemporary art in these circumstances, therefore, is not only to picture these divisive differences but also to counter their destructive effects by helping to build coeval connectivity" (Smith 2019, 2).

Ultimately, contemporary art can act as a tool of decolonization. Over the last years, artists, curators, theorists, journalists, academics, and other art professionals have been making huge efforts to re-write art history through different perspectives that were not included in the Western traditions of art education. The 'History of Art', as it is often perceived in the West, starts with the Ancient Greeks and Romans and makes stops along various male names in Europe and United States. "But who wrote this story about a bunch

of white dudes anyway?" ask Kyung An and Jessica Cerasi in the chapter "Whose story is the story of art?" (2017, 38). They explain:

> "It became obvious that writers of this history had relied on processes of exclusion and marginalization to further validate the existing order or relations between perceived opposites such as man/woman, white/non-white, high culture/low culture and civilized/uncivilized. Art history was clearly on the side of the dominant class, gender and race, while all other art was carefully written out for being 'craft', 'primitive', 'passé', 'derivative', 'exotic' or just plain 'bad'" (ibid.).

Contemporary art is contemporary because it is influenced both by what happens in the world and in human relations, and by counter responses to it. Giving representation to under-told histories and decoloniality are burning topics in the world, and such discussions give form to contemporary art today. Decoloniality gives us an opportunity to delink (disconnect) from the acceptance of Western thought and North Atlantic narratives as the only truth, and relink (re-connect) with other praxis of living and thinking. It is a perspective present in fields like art, psychology, history, anthropology, amongst others that understand Eurocentric narratives as one part of the pluriversal.

> "It opens up coexisting temporalities kept hostage by the Western idea of time and the belief that there is one single temporality: Western-imagined fictional temporality. Moreover, it connects and brings together in relation—as both pluri- and interversals—local histories, subjectivities, knowledges, narratives, and struggles against the modern/colonial order and for an *otherwise*" (Walsh and Mignolo 2018, 3).

It goes beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss the subject of decoloniality. The reason why I briefly introduce the topic in this research is because - as we will see over the next few paragraphs - this perspective has a significant influence in contemporary art practices today across the world. Working towards decolonizing the world is another reason why contemporary art matters. I hereby make reference to two artists amongst plethora of respected people in the field.

Grada Kilomba is a leading artist when it comes decolonial practices in the art world. She interrogates the power relations of knowledge by tackling subjects such as trauma, memory, colonialism, and violence in her performances and videos. The Lisbon-born artist, philosopher, academic, and writer builds storytelling to touch internal and profound

points when it comes to thinking about what is humanity, who we are, and who is the marginalized 'Other'[2].

In the interview titled *What do we need art for?* the artist says: "I realized that, through art, I don't simply deliver something that can be consumed, but I create a storytelling that transports people to another dimension, a deeper dimension, where they start questioning themselves" (Kilomba 2021). Concerned with the barbarity that repeats itself in history when history is not properly told, she tackles extremely violent topics of oppressive structures with poetic language. "This gives the audience access and empathy to the story that is being told" (ibid).

She became more and more interested in creating a work that does not answer questions but creates them. Grada Kilomba constructs settings with characters and narratives to deal with the political, social, and emotional conflicts of the human tragedy and show that the macro-narrative created by the Western World is only one of many existing narratives.

> "We need art to raise new questions, to look at very prominent conflicts in a position of absolute responsibility, in a position that is not only a cognitive knowledge that remains in my head, that is rationalized, but in a place where I feel touched emotionally and I feel engaged and responsible. And I think this is the motor to transform society" (ibid).

When it comes to re-telling art history, Denilson Baniwa in another respected reference and an important representative of the indigenous communities in Brazil. He appropriates Western narratives to retell them from an indigenous perspective through drawings, paintings, installations and projections.

> "My work is about trying to understand the historical processes in Brazil and its occupation. I seek out a kind of poetry of violence, of the rape of this land, and in my work both things are connected to the construction of the nation's history by western art and the exploitation of the land by agribusiness, since both derive from a nationalism geared towards annulling any kind of local history, superimposing progress over any occupation that preceded the times marked by Western presence," explains Baniwa (2021).

[2] In his theory of Orientalism, Edward Said defends that the Other is everything that lies outside of the self. The Self is the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the Other is strange (the Orient, the east, "them") (Said 1978, 43)

While he is an artist, he is first and foremost an activist committed to the Amazonian Indigenous Movement. During a journalistic interview I did with him in May 2021, Baniwa told me that art is what helps him to "build bridges between the indigenous and non-indigenous worlds. Now art is the tool I use to communicate, to translate our narratives into a visual aesthetic for people outside our community to relate with" *(*Baniwa 2021*)*[3]. In this sense, to both artists Baniwa and Kilomba, art matters because it is a way to talk about "Otherness", tackle on issues of identity, and address representation in art history and history as a whole. Through addressing multiple narratives, art becomes an invisible link that promotes empathy between different groups of people.

1.3 Why is it so difficult to understand?

If contemporary art is so relatable to everything we know, and cannot be separated from our reality, why do so many people find it a challenge to approach it?

> **"**The problem we all face when encountering a new work of art, is one of comprehension. It doesn't matter if you are an established art dealer, a leading scholar or a museum curator; anyone can find themselves at something of a loss when facing a painting or sculpture that is fresh out of an artist's studio" (Gompertz 2012, 21), writes Will Gompertz in the introduction of *What are you looking at?*.

The author approaches the readers who want to learn more about contemporary art by telling a relatable story. In one of his encounters with Sir Nicholas Serota, the past Director of Britain's Tate Gallery and current Chair of Arts Council England, told him he can be 'daunted' when entering an artist's studio: "'I often don't know what to think,' he said. 'I can find it very intimidating.' That is quite an admission by a man who is a world authority on modern and contemporary art. What chance for the rest of us?" (ibid., 19).

Whilst many people would say contemporary art is difficult to understand, that is not a general complaint about modern art, which extended itself roughly from the end of the 19th century until the half of the 20th century (The Art Story). Whereas there is a critical distance to what is regarded as modern art, contemporary art is everything that is being produced today. There is preexisting and institutionalized cultural reasoning surrounding

[3] Interview with artist Denilson Baniwa by Julia Flamingo, March 23, 2020.

modern art. Masters and masterpieces have been thoroughly explained. In art books, modernist artists are divided into avant-garde movements (Surrealism, Dadaism, Cubism and dozens of other –isms), which for didactic purposes are clearly separated into schools, styles and characteristics. By contrast, contemporary art, lacking the distance of time, and dealing with the fact that its status is always changing and expanding, is not easily conceptualized and categorized. About the difference of modern and contemporary art (what he calls post-modernism), Lance Esplund writes:

> "Postmodernism takes an anti-aesthetic, nihilistic stance, one that denies that there is any discernible or hierarchical value in anything, that believes there are no such aesthetic distinctions as "good" and "bad," "less than" and "greater than." The Postmodernists assert that all art is subjective, that there are no truths—only interpretations—and that the Modernists' so-called values and qualitative judgments are insignificant and unmeasurable." (Esplund 2018, 22)

Still on the differences between modern and contemporary art, Terry Smith writes:

> "Fresh openness to the present, to immediacy, to direct contact between art and everyday life was essential to each of the avant-garde movements that shook modern art to its core during the 1950s and 1960s—among them Situationism, happenings and environments, Performance Art, Fluxus, Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptual, Political, and Feminist Art. Together, these experiments transformed modern art fundamentally, preparing it to become contemporary" (Smith 2011, 316).

The notion of contemporary art is constantly being challenged, shifting and expanding. Therefore, the challenges to explain what contemporary art is, to put it into boxes, classify it and divide it into schools and movements like, for didactic purposes, has been done with modern art, is an almost impossible task. Moreover, to do so would be to neglect the core reason why contemporary art (or conceptual art) was born: the understanding that there are no boundaries in art.

> "Contemporary art is no longer one kind of art, nor does it have a limited set of shared qualities somewhat distinct from those of the art of past periods in the history of art yet fundamentally continuous with them. It does not presume inevitable historical development; it has no expectation that present confusion will eventually cohere into a style representative of this historical moment. Such art is multiple, internally differentiating, category-shifting, shape-changing, unpredictable (that is, diverse)—like contemporaneity itself" (ibid., 9).

It goes beyond the scope of this research to thoroughly analyze the transition from modern to contemporary art and the schisms between them– in that respect, Smith's publication *Contemporary Art* provides insightful information and analysis. These anecdotes are an

effort to respond to the general belief that modern art is easier to understand than contemporary art, which very often can discourage people from approaching contemporary art spaces, exhibitions, artworks and artists.

There is no common truth to art in general, but some conventions can help categorize it and therefore simplify the process of learning. In contemporary art, 'understanding' sometimes requires a discursive practice. Other times, it only means looking at an artwork and somehow relating to it, letting it reverberate in your mind or body.

> "So what's its purpose?", asks Gompertz: "The answer is to simply be seen, enjoyed and judged purely on its aesthetic and material terms: how it looks and the way it makes you feel. There's no requirement to 'interpret' the work—there is no hidden meaning to look for. Which, to my mind, makes it rather liberating. For once there are no tricks or specialist knowledge required, just a decision to be made: do you like it or not? I like it" (2012, 413).

To be struck by an artwork at first sight is an amazing experience. The reason why a specific sculpture catches your attention is not even rationalized until you give that experience some thought. On other occasions, a first encounter with an artwork is not as powerful of a moment, however, the work becomes more interesting after learning more about it. Sometimes, the discourse around an artwork allows us to relate to it in a new way.

Figure 3 - *Equivalent VIII* (1966), by Carl Andre (*© Carl Andre/VAGA, New York and DACS, London 2022)*

Take Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII* (1966) as an example. The sculpture is 'simply' made of two layers of bricks laying on the floor, yet learning about how this 'simple' sculpture challenged the way many people think about art can blow your mind. It consists of 120 white sand-lime bricks which can be stepped on. When it was first show in 1966, this caused a scandal: how can someone literary walk on an artwork? Some visitors confused the artwork with the floor of the gallery. The Art Story website defends:

> "Largely because his work is so low-lying and always presented on the ground, his work can often seem extremely unobtrusive. This is a quality which Andre has also cultivated. He has never been interested in making vast, monumental works which dwarf the viewer. Instead, Andre has often said that he likes to make sculptures which you can be in the same room with, but ignore if you choose to." (The Art Story, n.d.).

The work revolutionizes how the traditional history of art perceives sculpture: made of marble, displayed in pedestals, and representing values such as beauty. With *Equivalent*, Carl Andre did the opposite. "Many of his low-lying, segmented works came to redefine for a new generation of artists the very nature of sculpture itself." (ibid.).

Hence, whereas the background and references we each individually possess are enough to 'understand' a contemporary art piece, the more we each improve our vocabulary, the more tools we have inside us to access the artwork. In his book titled *Playing to the Gallery: Helping Contemporary Art in Its Struggle to Be Understood*, artist Grayson Perry makes a suitable comparison to illustrate this matter:

> "For somebody to walk into a contemporary art gallery for the first time and expect to understand it straight away would be like me walking into a classical music concert, knowing nothing about classical music, and saying, 'Oh, it's all just noise.' We might be bemused or even angered by the work, but with a few of the right tools we might find that we understand and appreciate it" (Perry 2014, 9).

As explained in the first part of this chapter, when it comes to contemporary art, like conceptual art, the idea or concept of an artwork is more important than its form, shape, aesthetic, or end product. If discourse is so important in the process-making of an art piece,

it is also an important notion in the relationship between an artwork and its audience. I agree with Lance Esplund as in the introduction of *The Art of Looking*, he elucidates:

> "I do not aim to convince you that my way of seeing is the only way of seeing, or that the art I love is the art you should love—that the art I've assembled on my personal altar is the art that should grace your altar. Rather, my aim is to familiarize you with the language of art, to help you open up to art that might be unfamiliar, to engage further with the art that interests you already—whether it is Modern, contemporary, or ancient—to begin to assemble your own personal altar." (Esplund 2018, 31)

Meaning-making is constituted through a process of looking which takes into account a range of perspectives for thinking about the artwork. The first is the personal approach, which "is a principle located within constructivist learning theory which posits that the construction of meaning depends on the prior knowledge, values and beliefs of the viewer, who finds points of connection and reference between these aspects of themselves and the art work (Hein 1995, 67). Responses are informed by the 'connotational baggage' brought by a viewer to an artwork (Bal and Bryson 1991, 81). "It is about the connections a viewer brings to their reading from their experience of the world," write Helen Charman and Michaela Ross in the text *Contemporary Art and the Role of Interpretation* (2022). To them, this process is enriched by "expanding on personal responses and building up new habits of looking […]. Creating interpretations requires a measure of self-awareness in that the viewer's personal history, gender, social class, race and ethnicity will inform a reading of an art work." (ibid., 88). They go on to argue that associations the audience makes with an artwork are influenced by personal responses that can change every time, and be as revealing about the viewer as they are about the work itself.

The second perspective that informs meaning-making, according to Charman and Ross, is looking at an art object and considering "the variety of ways contemporary art conveys meaning through its material and formal qualities." It is a process of interpretation based on questioning the means used by the artist to express their concept "Through doing so they connected the 'what' of the work – what do I see in front of me? with the 'how' of the work – how has the artist used their materials and the formal language of image making to convey meaning?" (ibid., 93).

The final part of the framework for looking at contemporary art that Charman and Ross present, is to consider how the wider context of a work can be integral to its meaning. This can help the discussion move from the "metaphorical associations of the materiality of the object to real-world connections". To them, this depends on how clearly information is communicated by the work. "Even if we do not know the specific language or political context of an artwork, what can we get from it purely by looking?" (ibid., 86). Taking these processes into account means we must consider the concept of multiple open-ended interpretations and the possibility that there is always space for expanding readings of an artwork.

I would add one more perspective to those pointed out by Charman and Ross: readings, texts and information that surround the work influence the process of meaning-making. Label and wall text presented in the exhibition, press releases, curatorial text, interviews or articles available online, artist statements, or an anecdotes about the artist or the artwork – everything counts as material to expand the process of looking at contemporary art and creating meaning. We cannot ignore the fact that basically every person visiting an exhibition has a cellphone with an Internet connection and can do a Google search to read/listen/watch contents that will help them to interpret the work they are looking at. The importance of these sources is clear to museums and can be seen in the rise of QR codes that link to more information in exhibitions and the increasing popularity of apps such as Smartify and Bloomberg Connects that give more audio-visual context to an exhibition. Therefore, the third point about "considering the wider context" that Charman and Ross present, for me also means getting information not only from what is communicated by the work, but also by other sources.

Resorting to the comparison between modern and contemporary art, one can broadly say that in modern art signs, references and stories were implied inside the frame of the painting or within the framework of the art piece. The narrative is there to be unfolded and discovered by the viewer, even if each one of the viewers has different interpretations of it. Conversely, contemporary art is an echo, a reflex, a mirror and an answer to the real world. References and signs are not restricted to the artwork itself. For the most part, audiences must look to the world to understand a contemporary art piece. The metaphor of the frame

becomes clearer: in contemporary art, frames are rare because one must zoom out from the artwork to be able to create discourse around it.

A similar comparison is made by Terry Smith in the chapter *Late Modern Art Becomes Contemporary*:

> "Previous art in all media had prioritized the concentration of its constituent elements around internal intensities, thus creating an artwork that presented itself as an autonomous object to be pleasurably admired, although, for some, it was also a secret to be grasped by assiduous and ardent viewing. In contrast, the artists who sought to prioritize the spectator's immediate experience of the work began to conceive the viewer as also possessing other senses, notably those of touch (tactility), of movement in space (vestibularity), and of passage through time (temporality)—in short, as inhabitants of an active body. Opening out the work of art became crucial; showing its parts to be extending in relation to each other became instinctive." (2011, 31)

Resorting to information outside the frame of the artwork–meaning, in the world–is thus perfectly fine. Researching for the artwork or artist on Google, watching videos about it on YouTube, reading the exhibition press release or catalogue, approaching attendants, or taking part in guided tours–everything counts in understanding the thinking behind what is on view and assists viewers to access the narrative surrounding the work.

Contemporary art has no definitive conventions other than being a field in which polarized ideas coexist. In the words of art critic Boris Groys: "The field of art is not a pluralistic field but a field strictly structured according to the logic of contradiction. It is a field where every thesis is supposed to be confronted with its antithesis" (2008, 56). If we expect art to be an object, contemporary art dematerializes it. Art can be a performance, gatherings of people, or sound. Throughout art history, if it was expected for a work of art to be beautiful, in contemporary art the concept of beauty is incessantly questioned. Other contradictions such as high and low art, inside and outside, mass production and originality, just to name a few, are always put into question by contemporary artists.

In her text *What's in it for me?*, theorist and artist Lan Tuazon boldly proclaims: "Because contemporary art is itself in a state of becoming, it turns students into witnesses of their own cultural-historical present (2011, 13)." I subscribe to this idea and would generalize this thought by replacing 'students' with 'people'. I also endorse her assertion that as

interpreters of art's meaning, everyone stands on equal ground. The faculty of one's common sense and language is all that one needs.

> "The process of art interpretation is an exercise in intelligence that requires only the most basic human critical faculties of observation, emotion, and speech. Art and its discourse can be a simple process of having students ascribe language to their senses, form meaning, and then collect proof to support their thinking." (ibid., 12).

When it comes to finding meaning in contemporary art, there is no master language to learn and reproduce, only tools that help to build vocabulary and repertoire. One of them is our example, outlined in Chapter five, "Bigorna, a didactic platform for contemporary art".

2. LANGUAGE IN ART WRITING

For the sake of didactics, I will begin this chapter by creating a hypothetical situation. Let us pretend a new exhibition is opening soon at a gallery nearby. The newsletter is sent out to the gallery's mailing list, and the press release is attached to the invitation for the opening. Readers are faced with sentences such as the following:

> "The intensity of gesture felt in chromatic compositions, luminosity, and cadence defines the personality of each figure and of its subgroups. Gradual passages make the installation of the works a carefully orchestrated group. The practice of monotype printing is at the heart of the process" (Matos, 2021).

During the opening, gallery-goers enter the space and after a quick look at the showcased works, they move towards the wall text written by the curator of the exhibition. The seemingly complicated text – or sophisticated as some would argue - reads:

> "The excess of material takes the paper to its limit. It overflows, saturates and loses its ability to retain. There is loss, but there is saturation; there is sedimentation, but there is vanishing. Therefore, making is a continuous process that allows the transference of intentions and matter, as well as an incessant entropic gesture" (ibid).

Some visitors may search Google for the words 'monotype' and 'entropic', and be satisfied enough to continue their stroll through the exhibition. Other guests, however, would still struggle to grasp the full context of the text even after looking up the definitions of those specific concepts. Some will decide to just enjoy a pleasurable and artsy evening without engaging more deeply with the text. More interested individuals would closely read the captions hung beside the pieces hoping for some clues. However, they would soon realize *Untitled No1* and *Untitled No2* will not help them with more written content. It would not come as a surprise if a great sum of those gallery-goers got frustrated with the communication around the exhibition. Apart from believing the communication material is directed to insiders and not to them, they might as well believe that art as a whole is not approachable. After a sequence of similar disappointing experiences, they might come to the conclusion that art exhibitions are not made for them. Or even worse, that art is not for them.

Visitors may have made up their minds about the artworks, the artists, or the curatorial narrative, or at least have opinions about whether they felt intrigued or indifferent

regarding what they just saw. Nevertheless, it can be only right to affirm that individuals of that same exhibition could have had a different experience if only the press release, the curatorial text, and the captions had 'talked' to them.

This example is not an uncommon experience for many people encountering the art world. Comparable situations happen in other contexts, and as a result, people prefer to steer clear of contemporary art venues rather than get frustrated once again. It is not their fault. There is a specialized language common to the entire art world that dictates what is said about art and, more importantly, how it is said.

2.1 Can contemporary art really be for everyone?

The internationalized art world relies on a unique language, titled *International Art English* by Alix Rule and David Levine (2013). The American writers wanted to understand why it is so common to read difficult texts about art. Therefore, they decided to describe the language of contemporary art by analyzing a corpus of press releases sent by *e-flux*, a listserv that sends out three press releases per day about contemporary art events worldwide. It is the most read and powerful instrument of communication about art since its inception in 1999. Its announcements are paid, however not every submission is accepted. For-profit galleries are not illegible; therefore, its purpose is not commercial but purely informational.

Rule and Levine have assembled and analyzed thirteen years of *e-flux* press announcements in order to defend the hypothesis that International Art English is a language used by the entire art community: "Not just artists and curators, but gallery owners and directors, bloggers, magazine editors and writers, publicists, collectors, advisers, interns, art-history professors, and so on" (ibid.). To them, *International Art English* is not a technical vocabulary or even "a sort of specialized English no different than the language a car mechanic uses when he discusses harmonic balancers or popper valves" (ibid.). By referring to an obscure car part, a mechanic is not including or excluding the other from his speech. He is not even interpellating his clients as members of a common world.

The unclear and unapproachable *International Art English* is the language used globally for art writing with the aim to consecrate artworks, artists, exhibitions, and art events as significant, critical and, indeed, contemporary. "IAE developed to describe works that transcended the syntax and terminology used to interpret the art of earlier times" (Ibid.). This language is used by art writers, curators, critics, artists, journalists, bloggers, and art historians because they identify it as significant and critical. This is exactly the same language used in the press release and curatorial text by the hypothetical gallery at the beginning of this chapter.

The problem with this language is that *International Art English* has become a hegemonic language for writing about art. It is not only in English-speaking countries that people claim that contemporary art "is not for me" – this happens all over the world, and beyond the borders of English-speaking countries, which leads us to affirm that *International Art English* dictates what is written about contemporary in many different places in the world. It is a convention born in English which is used in different languages around the world and shapes what is understood as standardized art writing.

To Rule and Levine "people all over the world have adopted this language because the distributive capacities of the Internet now allow them to believe—or to hope—that their writing will reach an international audience" (2013). *E-flux* is their case study, however, the authors clearly state that this language is used in all different formats of texts about art.

It is enlightening to understand the genealogy of *International Art English* (IAE). To Rule & Levine, the journal *October* is a viable candidate for its origins. Founded in 1976, the academic journal specializing in contemporary art, criticism and theory was based in New York and translated French post-structural texts for the English-speaking academic scene. Art historians Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, who established *October*, saw contemporary criticism as not rigorous enough and were looking to bring certain criteria and methodologies to art criticism in the United States.

> "Co-founder Rosalind Krauss, herself a writer in the field of criticism, was frustrated by the current titles widely read in the United States (namely *Artforum*) for their lack of engagement with the critical social issues of the time. So, she collaborated with

> fellow writer Annette Michelson to begin the journal, which was interested in art and art writing in which theory intersected with modern art discourses. The fact that two writers founded *October* is crucial to the ambition and the lineage of the publication, now numbering some 173 editions" (Haylock & Patty, 2021, 198).

The texts Krauss and Michelson published "had an enormous impact on the interpretation and evaluation of art and also changed the way writing about art sounded" (Rule & Levine 2013, 15). This explains, for instance, the commonly used suffixes *-ion, -ity, -ality, and –ization* in IAE, as well as the proliferation of the use of articles before adjectives and nouns, for instance: *the political*, *the space of absence*, *the recognizable and the repulsive*. Rule and Levine explain that the Frankfurt School was also a great influence on *October*'s generation, who emulated German stylistic signatures (ibid.). An example would be the repetitive — and imprecise — use of the words *production*, *negation* and *totality*. The journal *October* elevated faults of translation to the level of linguistic norms. *International Art English*

> "has a distinctive lexicon: *aporia, radically, space, proposition, biopolitical, tension, transversal, autonomy*. An artist's work inevitably interrogates, questions, encodes, transforms, subverts, imbricates, displaces—though often it doesn't do these things so much as it serves to, functions to, or seems to (or might seem to) do these things. IAE rebukes English for its lack of nouns: Visual becomes *visuality*, global becomes *globality*, potential becomes *potentiality*, experience becomes *… experienciability*." (ibid.)

It did not take long for these mannerisms to spread. "A decade later, much of the middlebrow *Artforum* sounded similar. Soon after, so did artists' statements, exhibition guides, grant proposals, and wall texts" (ibid.). Whatever the content, the aim is to sound to the art world like someone worth listening to, by adopting an approximation to its elite language.

It is a very common feeling for visitors of art venues to feel like they do not understand what they are seeing or experiencing when they encounter contemporary art. The number of readers of the essay *International Art English* on Triple Canopy's website is a reflex of that: "In the year following the publication, *International Art English* garnered 69,023 unique page views (which is as close as Triple Canopy can get to an estimate of readership) and was translated into several languages," writes the editor of the New York-based magazine and nonprofit organization Alexander Provan (2015). The heated debates

the text has generated about the relationship between language, legibility, and power in the art world in several symposiums, as well as opinion texts published on different media outlets, confirmed that the text expressed a feeling shared between many individuals.

2.2 Are we speaking the same language?

Roy Harris refers to the language used in art discourse as Artspeak. In his book *The Necessity of Artspeak*, he explains that Western tradition has been developing it for many centuries, since antiquity, as a means to "elaborate social rationale to justify their existence" (2003, 194). To him, Artspeak is a form of language that changes with the passing of time. He also defends that it was the effort of the German philosophers in the 18th and 19th centuries that brought 'extravagances' to Artspeak when it comes to language and vocabulary. He claims that their "love for idealization is chiefly to blame for opening Western artspeak to the infiltration on high-sounding nonsense" (ibid., 207).

Harris borrowed the term Artspeak from the art historian Robert Atkins (1990) who popularized the expression in reference to the buzzwords used by critics in the art world. His book is similar to a dictionary of succinct definitions of circa 150 terms used in contemporary art. Harris, however, uses the term in a broader sense to cover "the whole range of discourse about works of art and their appreciation (or disparagement)." (ibid,, xii).

To him, Artspeak is the discussion of art loaded with political, educational, and social terms directly related to its context that has been a locus of controversy for most of its long history.

> "According to sceptics, its main function has always been to create a mystique surrounding the work of certain artists – poets, painters and musicians in particular. For the less sceptical, the very existence of artspeak bears witness to the heights human civilization has reached; for Artspeak is seen as a language forged in order to express lofty truths about human creativity and spiritual goals, truths which it would be impossible to express adequately in any less rarified discourse, truths to which less privileged cultures have yet to graduate." (ibid., xix)

Rather than explaining specific terms or pointing out recent challenges of art writings, Harris' book thoroughly analyzes how language has been used to talk about art over the

centuries, as well as the way language itself can be art. For him, Artspeak works "in servitude to the demands of vested interests and the self-promotion of experts" and, must be daily questioned and under "eternal vigilance" as he says in the last lines of the publication. "What must the citizens of such a society do? They must take up the responsibility of questioning, at every possible opportunity, the terms in which artistic judgments are delivered" (ibid., 208). I subscribe to this idea: questioning the language used in art writing is one main concerns of this dissertation.

I cannot stress enough the fact that while *International Art English* and Artspeak are titles given in English to this type of art language born in English-speaking countries, these art languages go way beyond the limits of United States and England. The vast majority of examples and references of this dissertation are in English exactly because it is the most widely-spoken language in the world, and its supremacy influences non-English speaking countries to follow its patterns. The art world follows this same frame: non-English speaking countries and non-Western countries endorse and replicate the rules, canons, and status quo of where the art world has created a model to be reproduced. In Portuguese, my native language, and the language of the country where this thesis is being developed, there are no guides about Artspeak to be found. There are no how-to guides for writing about art in Portuguese. This is a symptom of the misconception that there is only one right way to write about contemporary art – the one that follows *International Art English* or Artspeak models, which is hierarchical and inaccessible. I respond to this problem by bringing one possibility to the table: the use of plain, empathic, and uncomplicated language to talk about contemporary art.

The use of IAE or Artspeak makes texts about art unpalatable to the public. To the writer Cara Ober, this creates an enormous gap between laypeople and contemporary art. Ober argues that wider audiences are consistently been turned off by contemporary art because of the lack of accessibility of the language used to write about it.

> "Truly, contemporary art and artists have the potential to foster a sense of wonder, to expand one's understanding of self and the world, and to present effective alternatives to the way we live our lives, but without the proper invitation, a huge segment of the population is missing out" (2019).

One of the reasons why they are 'missing out' on exhibitions, art performances, talks, fairs, and other art events, is because they do not feel welcomed by the communication surrounding these events. Most of the time, audiences feel undermined, diminished, or even ashamed because they 'do not understand' the art they see and what is written about it.

> "These are people who would rather get a colonoscopy than go to a museum. These are intelligent, liberal-arts-educated individuals who work hard, pay their bills, and don't want to spend their free time being told, via incomprehensible academic language, that they are too dumb for modern and contemporary art" (ibid.).

Later in the text, she claims:

> "I blame 'Artspeak,' also known as International Art English or IAE, which reflects the insular snobbery of the top tier of the art world and reinforces class barriers to the detriment of contemporary art and most living artists who would benefit from a growing network of fans and patrons" (ibid.).

A handful of artists have created artworks to explore – and mock – the art world phenomenon of Artspeak. Amongst them is Istambul-based artist Selçuk Artut, who has developed the piece *Variable* (2017), a trained computer with text from Heidegger's 1927 existentialist book *Being and Time*. Keywords such as *Movement* and *Sequence* appear on the screen beside three-sentence-long statements that sound very similar to descriptions you would find in contemporary art texts. The online marketplace and editorial *Artsy* featured Artut's piece in one article:

> "Fundamentally, though, the work is an opportunity to reflect on the all-too-frequent absurdities of complicated art writing, in which adjectives and clauses resolve into nothing but a maelstrom of confusion. While humorous in Artut's work, this experience has more serious ramifications in its ability to alienate people from the art world" (Jones 2015).

Another example is *Fax-Bak Service* (1998) by the collaborative British art group BANK. Between 1998 and 1999, the group members – Simon Bedwell, John Russell and Milly Thompson – proofread and copy-edited more than 300 press releases published by galleries in London and New York.

> "The procedure was simple: after adding their mocking corrections, the artists faxed the promotional texts back to the respective galleries. The BANK Fax-Bak Service exposes the art market's (ongoing) Sisyphean effort to legitimise itself through boasting, self-important and nonsensical language" (Thompson).

In *A user's guide to Artspeak*, the British journalist Andy Beckett uses both terms International Art English (IAE) and Artspeak as equivalents. In the text, published in *The Guardian,* he writes:

> "If you've been to see contemporary art in the last three decades, you will probably be familiar with the feelings of bafflement, exhaustion, or irritation that such gallery prose provokes. You may well have got used to ignoring it. As Polly Staple, art writer and director of the Chisenhale Gallery in London, puts it: 'There are so many people who come to our shows who don't even look at the programme sheet. They don't want to look at any writing about art'" (Beckett, 2013).

Beckett also says that the essay written by Rule and Levine "has since become one of the most widely and excitedly circulated pieces of online cultural criticism. It is easy to see why. Levine and Rule write about IAE in a droll, largely jargon-free style" (ibid.). By quoting Levine, Beckett also creates a clear connection between the use of IAE and the art market:

> "The flood of new money into art in recent years may have helped swell the IAE bubble. 'The more overheated the market gets, the more overheated the language gets [...]. The more you can muddy the waters around the meaning of a work, the more you can keep the value high'" (Ibid).

As it has been pointed out, *International Art English* is directly linked to the use of language as means of differentiation, control, and power.

2.3 Do you know who I am?

More than to be understood, International Art English was demanding to be recognized. The language that art writing developed in the late 1970s alienated the English reader "but it distanced you less the more of it you could find familiar" (ibid.). Therefore, art writing was distinguishing readers and allowed some writers to sound more authoritative than others, to give the impression they knew more about the artwork or understood more about the artist's practice than other writers, critics and even readers.

"Authority is relevant here because the art world does not deal in widgets. What it values is fundamentally symbolic, interpretable. Hence the ability to evaluate—the power to deem

certain things and ideas significant and critical—is precious" (ibid.). Hence, art writing showed to art professionals, gallerists, curators and critics that their practices were serious and important. It was a reflex and a symptom of the willingness of the art community and art market to be hermetic and powerful.

People inside and outside the art world have grown accustomed to the use of IAE. It is not uncommon to hear people complaining about how difficult it is to understand a text in a gallery or museum, however, this does not mean it will generate a consistent discussion to question its use and purpose. IAE is a means to sustain the status quo of contemporary art.

As old users are comfortable with it and perpetuate the use of IAE, new users can reproduce this language very easily. In their early careers, interns at galleries, museums, media outlets, PR agencies and art institutions soon learn how to use difficult words in complex texts to refer to an exhibition, an artwork, or an event. "However laughable the language may seem to outsiders, to art-world people, speaking or writing in IAE can be a potent signal of insider status. As some of the lowest but also the hungriest in the art food chain, interns have much to gain from acquiring fluency in it" (ibid.).

A very common practice in the art world is to write press releases aiming to extol an exhibition or an artist. Instead, they end up being indecipherable texts – as the one indicated at the beginning of this chapter – that dignify the art and increase the distance between what is written and the reader. A common misunderstanding is to believe the problem is not the text, but the one who is reading it. The outcome is critical: visitors of art venues, and readers of articles who repeatedly encounter the use and abuse of this complex language automatically transfer the lack of clarity of the text to contemporary art in general. "A common misconception about the inaccessibility of contemporary art can emerge because writers are always wrestling with clear expression – therefore, if art texts seem meaningless so too must be art" (Williams 2014, 9).

In his book *Language and Symbolic Power*, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu sheds light on a range of issues concerned with language and language use, from politics and markets

to rituals and social spheres. In regard to understanding and recognizing a discourse, he writes:

> "The specificity of the discourse of authority (e.g. a lecture, sermon, etc.) consists in the fact that it is not enough for it to be *understood* (in certain cases it may even fail to be understood without losing its power), and that it exercises its specific effect only when it is *recognized* as such. This recognition – whether accompanied by understanding or not – is granted, in the manner of something taken for granted" (Bourdieu 1991, 17).

It is not a mistake to say that individuals who take part in the art community replicate the use of IAE to be recognized, even if they do not do it consciously. In their turn, artists also feel pressured to employ IAE to identify their work as significant enough, resulting in rarified and exclusive language. Ultimately, it alienates art lovers or laypeople who they otherwise could achieve with their work and what is said about it. The employment of this *legitimate* language, as Pierre Bourdieu calls it is defined by its distance from the 'common' language, and belief in its legitimacy.

In her dissertation, Brazilian writer Thais Macedo Gurgel highlights the importance of texts to approximate audiences and exhibitions. She discusses wall texts used in several shows in São Paulo, pointing out how difficult it is to read some of them. Thais Gurgel argues that complex and difficult texts are tools used by art institutions to elevate art to a sacred status.

> "Perhaps in the search of legitimation, of being recognized as art, contemporary works need the ritual value which is built around themselves [...]. Only a specialized audience is able to relate to contemporary art [...] This possibly reflects in the resistance to use texts as a form of mediation in contemporary art venues" (2013, 65)[4].

Artists, curators, art professionals, critics, and other individuals of the art community accept and perpetuate the IAE because they believe in the game they are playing. Bourdieu writes:

> "But all individuals, whatever their aims and chances of success, will share in common certain fundamental presuppositions [...]. The very existence and persistence of the game or field presupposes a total and unconditional 'investment', a practical and unquestioning belief, in the game and its stakes (Bourdieu 1991, 26).

[4] Author's translation

Audiences are therefore subjected to this relation of power. They accept how things are and how the game works because they do not have other alternatives to the use of the legitimate language of the art world. IAE or Artspeak has been accepted as part of the art world system. It works like a convention, etiquette or protocol, relatable to what French theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes called myth, a type of speech that is connected to the formation and perpetuation of ideologies:

> "A myth is a system of communication, that it is a message […]. It is therefore by no means confined to oral speech. It can consist of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows publicity; all these can serve as a support to mythical speech" (Barthes 1972, 141).

In his essay *Myth Today*, Barthes explains that myth is when a cultural object is appropriated and repurposed to create "myths" that carry new and often different implications. To him, myth-making is an effort to make culture appear like nature: myth makes an object of culture seem like natural, common sense and therefore above being questioned. The crux of what Barthes argues is that myth is deployed by the bourgeois to protect the dominant ideologies and society's existing interests. As an object of culture, IAE serves as support to protect the power of the art world and sustain its distinctness.

2.4 Who has written the *stories* of art?

International Art English was created and grounded in Western principles only. As mentioned above, this language took shape in the United States in 1976 and was rapidly disseminated throughout Western Europe. Countries in which knowledge and aesthetic epistemologies have been systemically validated as "the right" ones such as France, Germany, and England have enhanced the use of IAE to sustain and propagate an idealized canon of art. The centering of art writing in "Western First World countries" disconsidered art writing in countries in Asia, Africa and South America. More than sustaining art history's distinctness from other fields, IAE also reinforces the place of power of the art system and art market in Western countries, leaving people in other countries who are also writing – and making – art to the margins.

IAE is an idealized "traditional" discourse that enables, encourages, authorizes and justifies the superiority of a selected group of people in the Western art world. This structure of art writing with its own rules, jargon and vocabulary, is a common discourse to maintain already existing structures and systems of power. It confirms the hierarchy of domination and privilege of the "Western art world" to nourish the idea that what is written by a very specific group of privileged people is the only and right way to do it.

To talk about power relations in the art world is first and foremost to question who has written the story of art. The story of Western Art is centered around white and male privileges "based on cultural and economic capital, resulting in streams of power that are both formal (related to position and money) and symbolic (the order of appreciation, knowledge, visibility, and recognition)", according to Sofia M. Ciel in the text *Decolonizing Art Criticism* (2020). "This a*ccidental* selectiveness creates and maintains an incomplete and false idea of *what art is*" (ibid.).

According to Ciel, art writers play an important role in decolonizing the art world, which implies recognizing and fighting hierarchies, positions of power, and inequalities. She explains that:

> "Decolonising the art institution usually means reviewing the canon and questioning its ability to include different voices or perspectives (remembering that decolonisation is not the same as diversity). It also includes the practice of going beyond the dominant cultural groups and resisting the reproduction of colonial taxonomies" (ibid.).

Decolonising art writing is to recognize the fact that there are several stories of art. Institutions, magazines, critics, curators and other agents in the art ecosystem choose who they feature and therefore who becomes prominent in the art world. It acknowledges that what is written shapes discourse, makes some things visible and others invisible.

> "Decolonising art criticism, on the other hand, would mean raising equally fundamental questions about how stories are told, what the platforms of dialogue are, how they function, and finally, who is allowed to speak. The latter is a particularly uncomfortable question for writers and editors." (ibid.)

In the text *The Museum and the problem with Discourse*, publishing professional Megan Patty states:

> "Since the modern museum's foundation, the art writing that surrounds it has largely been commissioned from directors and curators who were, for the most part, white male art historians with lengthy theses of European art. […] The dominance of such figures in museum discourse only began to shift in the mid-2000s, with slow changes in the types of writers and authors being commissioned by museum publishers to write about art" (Haylock & Patty 2021, 201).

Books such as *The Story of Art Without Men* (2022) by British journalist Katy Hessel and other publications by feminist art historians like Griseida Polock's Vision and Difference (1988) aim to rewrite the story of art so that it includes women artists historically left outside the canon – the story of art written by white men of Western privileged countries. In the title of her book, Hessel alludes to *The Story of Art* (1950) by E.H. Gombrich, which has long been acclaimed as the definite art history bible but did not mention women artists when it was first published in 1950.

Studying art history does not necessarily include talking about the complexities of the various aesthetics and ways of understanding art that exist in the world, but only a part of it. Hence, the preference for the use of the word 'story' instead of 'history'. The concept of art story recognizes that there are other versions to an official narrative, the supposed canon, created and written by the above-mentioned group of people that makes us believe that there is just one history of art. We must instead reject a "supposedly neutral position of objectivity and universality, which in fact was neither universal nor objective; the same goes for art history and art criticism" (Ciel 2020).

Art and art writing are very much about questioning such canons, and even fighting for the belief that such canons should not exist, that aesthetic epistemologies should be broken at once. This can be clearly applied to International Art English or Artspeak which have been perpetuated as universal, as an absolute principle. IAE and Artspeak present a singular, homogenous story of the art world instead of considering a constellation of knowledges. The reality is that there is a constellation of stories of art possible, but only one of them claims to be exclusive. "The proposed pluralism of knowledges will facilitate radical democratization and the decolonization of knowledge and power" (ibid., 49). It goes beyond the scope of this dissertation to develop a nuanced discussion around decoloniality.

Though I am unable to go more deeply into the topic of decoloniality here, I recognize the importance of this topic and its role in creating more accessible approach to art stories.

In the text *Whose story is the story of art?,* An & Cerasi raise some important issues:

> "How should we understand similar works of art that emerge in different corners of the world at the same time? What happens when the art and culture of one nation are forced upon another through colonization? What does that mean in terms of influence and originality? How can we understand the impact of imperialism and capitalism on our evaluation of art and artists?" (2017, 41).

Much more than a dissertation is needed to answer those questions. It is a matter of years, not to say decades, of discussions aiming for a more egalitarian world.

Despite that, I believe writing about art plays an important role, and contributing to a more egalitarian world through writing also means having a critical approach to the language employed. As discussed previously in this dissertation, the use of a specialized language (in this case IAE or Artspeak) can be instrumental in creating a divide between the general public and a perceieved elite group of art world individuals. On that account, the use of simpler, uncomplicated, and day-to-day language can serve to bring people together and make art more widely accessible.

This is what Jacques Rancière calls the democratic potential of common language. In the book *Names Of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge* (1992), the French philosopher discusses the conditions of possibilities for writing, thinking and action, and their potential redistribution. In his analysis, Martin Grünfeld highlights such horizontal approach to discourse:

> "With his poetics of knowledge as a method of equality, Rancière aims at removing the force of descriptions and arguments from an unequal distribution by stressing the fundamental equality of the imaginative powers of language. Consequently, he presupposes the equality of common language as a condition for disrupting the orders of discourse. In Rancière's understanding of language, equality is built as a potential" (Grünfeld 2020, 59).

For Rancière, in principle, everybody can appropriate language and make sense of what is said. It is exactly because of this democratic nature of language that it can be used as a shared imaginative resource, and a way to make "redistribution on the sensible possible" (ibid.). What Rancière argues, and Grünfeld reiterates, is the possibility of removing the

vertical difference between the 'knowing' and the 'ignorant' if common language is used, "by tracing back discursive competences to an egalitarian level of linguistic competence and poetic invention" (ibid.), With the use of a common language, it is possible to destabilize borders and hierarchies and provide more people with "a broad, multi-facetted, and open perspective on diverse fields of knowledge production" (ibid., 58).

Discourses of supremacy, like IAE or Artspeak (and more broadly, even the English language) help find a common ground for communication amongst different people. However, they do not consider other existing voices, discourses, approaches, and languages. A poetics of knowledge is an attempt to recognize this responsibility and work towards rewriting history. "The poetics of knowledge functions as a counter movement that attempts to return knowledge discourses to their poetic moment, which entails a return to a fundamental equality of speaking beings," explains Grünfeld (ibid., 57). The first step towards empowerment is the disruption of hierarchies of discourses.

3. PLAIN LANGUAGE TO TALK ABOUT CONTEMPORARY ART

Consider there is a huge graffiti artwork on the side of a building between your home and work. Although you see that same street art twice every day, it is almost impossible not to be bewildered, or least intrigued, by the giant yellow character whose figure seems to be crossing threshold of the wall and gaining presence in the world. Even if you are not sure why it is there or how it was made, it moves you. The graffiti created by the Brazilian duo OSGEMEOS seems to be an integral part of your city's landscape. Undeniably, the figure and the work are also part of your life.

Figure 4 – untitled graffiti by OSGEMEOS in Lisbon (2010). (Photo by the author)

A very different experience happens when scrolling on social media: you come across a great number of posts sharing pictures of the installation *Comedian* (2019). Composed of a fresh banana affixed to a wall with duct tape, the work by Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan gained significant media attention because it was sold for US $120,000 at the Art Basel

Miami Beach fair, which intrigued people all over the world. So much as the banana and duct tape are ordinary objects – or exactly because of it – dozens of questions arise in your mind. Why is it even art? Who is responsible for pricing the piece? Who buys a banana and pays such an exorbitant amount for it? How long is this artwork going to last?

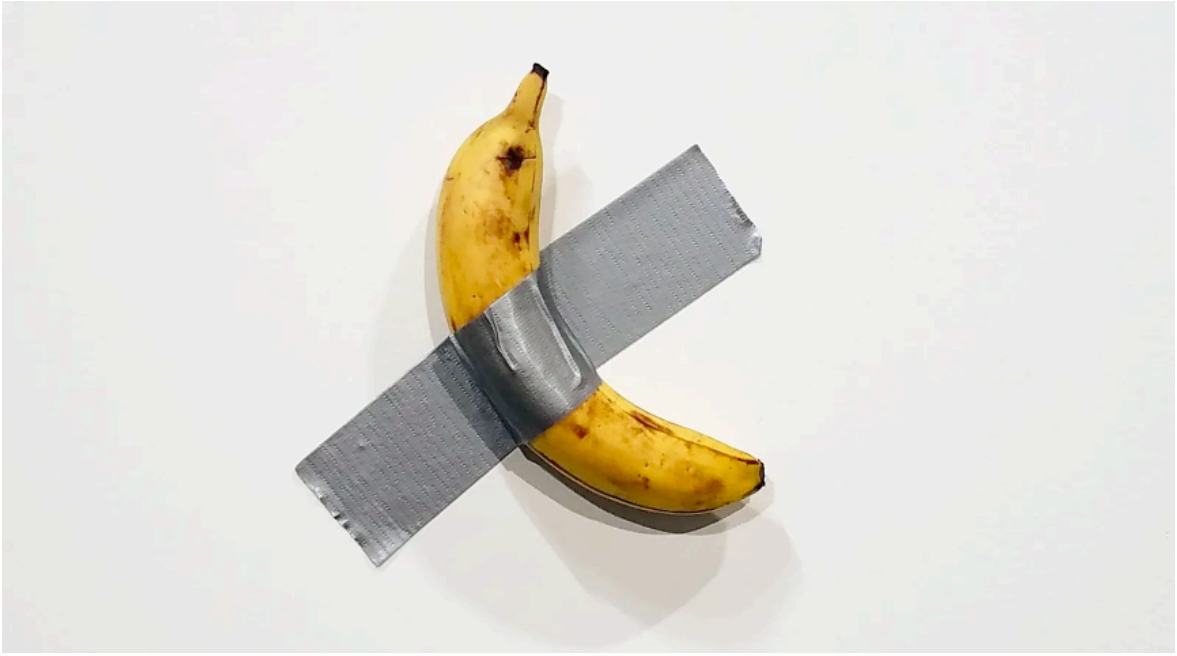

Figure 5 - Maurizio Cattelan's *Comedian* (2019). (Photo: RHONA WISE / EPA-EFE / Shutterstock)

Both are examples of contemporary artworks. By all means, they are distinct media, presented in different circumstances and made by creators coming from different backgrounds. Notwithstanding, both artworks can trigger thoughtful, in-depth discussions between those who see them. They have indeed each provoked someone to stop their day-to-day life, pay attention to them, and interrupt their daily thoughts, even if just for a few minutes. It is only right to affirm that, be it a more approachable artwork such as OSGEMEOS' graffiti or a conceptual installation and performance such as Cattelan's *Comedian*, those who want to engage with a nuanced discussion about them can benefit from more information, opinion, and content about these pieces, be it in written or spoken language. In the case of the banana hanging on a wall with duct tape, one can even transform what seems to be indecipherable into something that is comprehensible, captivating, and – why not, even fun.

3.1 Who is afraid of contemporary art?

When it comes to the relationship between art and art writing, and the role this practice plays in society, Astrid Vorstermans, publisher, editor, and founder of the publishing house and cultural agency Valiz, shares an enlightening perspective:

> "- Art should be embedded in society, and art writing should critically assess that position;
> - Art Writing can be poetic, contrary, smooth, easy, or difficult, it can have many tones or rhythms, but, in the end, it should be urgent and topical;
> - A publisher has the role and the obligation to amplify the message as best as possible, and try to spread and distribute ideas as widely as possible – to let them find roots, to allow many people to engage with them, to open up the discussion;
> - And a variation on the previous point: a publisher should find or build strong contexts, and make unexpected connections, so authors, readers, and creative makers will find fertile ground to connect to content and to each other" (Valiz in Patty & Haylock 2021, 245).

This is an extract of the interview published in the book *Art Writing in Crisis* (2021), a broad-ranging interrogation of art writing from more than twenty standpoints, organized by Megan Patty & Brad Haylock. Invited authors discuss "who produces the art writing we are reading, under what conditions, and to what ends?" (ibid., 10). Developed before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, the publication inevitably reverberates and addresses the calamities around the world during that critical period, but is not limited to it.

As it is a very recent compilation discussing art writing, the book talks about its role in a moment when the world is facing so many social, economic, political, and environmental issues. Vorstermans' thoughts about the role of art and art writing today are especially poignant and relevant to this dissertation:

> "The world is burning, open exchange and democracies are under threat, diversity and otherness are not being dealt with in a healthy way, many people no longer feel part of a wider community, solidarity is lacking. My strong belief is that the arts are able to bring in new imaginaries, which can lure people into looking differently, discussing, exchanging, and dealing with other and otherness." (ibid., 245).

If this is the role of art, then art writing should function as an intermediary between art and audience:

> "Art writing should build a diversified platform to investigate these ideas—to understand and give meaning to what art is doing and how it counteracts specific developments in the world; to be able to disagree with each other and formulate

> arguments, meaning substance; and to bring oxygen and vitality into the arts themselves, especially into the discussions that the arts are tackling." (ibid., 245)

According to writers Paul James and Brad Haylock, the role of art writers is becoming increasingly important to help us make sense of the world:

> "Art, even abstract and installation art, is representational in a way that makes it difficult to adequately embody and project understandings of a world in which the dominant threats and processes have become less palpable and more systematically abstract in their materiality. This makes writing about art, including writing by artists, increasingly important. Writing, including the entitling of an artwork, allows for abstract connections to be made that would otherwise remain ineffable" (in Patty & Haylock 2021, 51).

The importance of art in helping us understand our existence and the world around us was already thoroughly analyzed in the first chapter of this dissertation about contemporary art.

As thought-provoking as the publication *Art Writing in Crisis* (2021) can be, it does not profoundly discuss what, to me, is the crux of the matter about art writing: the recurrent use of pretentious and unclear language. If art writing is indeed in crisis, International Art English or Artspeak must be questioned as one probable cause of this crisis.

The crux of International Art English or Artspeak is the wrong assumption that they delineate *the* right way to write about contemporary art. It is a convention, a protocol, that is followed by people all over the world, regardless of being native English speakers or not. Nevertheless, they represent just one of the many ways to write about contemporary art. I believe that there are other ways which cherish accessibility and empathy by making use of plain language to communicate in a simple and close way, while not dismissing the complexities and multiplicities of the artworks. It does not matter which language – English, Portuguese, Mandarin, Spanish, French, Japanese, or Russian – the main point is that art writing can assist audiences in bringing art closer to their everyday life. However, the opposite can occur when a difficult and specialized language is employed in art writing. In these cases, the text generally does not work in favor of demystification, mediation, and approximation of the public to art. It functions as a barrier to approaching art. The question "Who is afraid of contemporary art?", asked by writers Kyung An and

Jessica Cerasi (2017)[5] is not a joke: this exclusionary and elitist approach to art contributes for people to actually feeling frightened by – or, at best, distant from – it.

Art writing is established as a mediator between artists, artworks, exhibitions, art venues, and audiences. It performs the important function of interpretation, explanation, and adding layers of information. Depending on its objective and clarity, art writing can also be a tool for accessibility, which in this case means aiming to use language as a bridge, a facilitator, and a disseminator. "Accessibility is about creating communities, workplaces, and services that allow everyone to participate fully in society without barriers. Accessibility also means providing access to information" (Government of Canada, n.d.).

Writers, critics, curators, marketing agencies, editors, publishers, and other art professionals can opt to use their text as a means to elucidate and discuss what is being displayed. These authors can use the content they are producing about an artwork, an artist, an exhibition, and an art venue to create layers of understanding and open new discussions. Art writing can be employed as means not only to bring written information about art to the public, but to contextualize the artwork, create connections between the artwork and our reality, and give day-to-day examples.

As International Art English is one convention of the language used to talk about contemporary art, there are also conventions for plain language. Federations and associations for Plain Language exist in several countries in the world, such as PLAIN (Plain Language Association International), which explained on their website in 2023: "A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information". The Plain Writing Act of 2010 defines plain language as: "Writing that is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience" (Plain Language Action and Information Network, n.d.) In his short definition of Plain English, Australian professor Robert Eagleson writes:

[5] The title is a pun on the play *Who is Afraid of Virgnia Woolf* (1962), by Edward Albee, which in its turn is a reinterpretation of the song *Who's afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?* From Walt Disney's *Three Little Pigs* (1933).

> "Plain English is clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as are necessary. It is language that avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction. It is not baby talk, nor is it a simplified version of the English language. Writers of plain English let their audience concentrate on the message instead of being distracted by complicated language. They make sure that their audience understands the message easily" (ibid.).

Although PLAIN was established in the English language 20 years ago, it is an international association present in more than 30 countries and 15 different languages. This fact is of paramount importance for this research. PLAIN is not advocating for clear communication only in English, yet promoting plain communication in *any* language. The same occurs with International Art English: even though this speech was born in English-speaking countries, it is followed by art professionals working across the world and in different languages. I defend the idea that the language spoken by the art world is a convention created in the United States and England, however its use extrapolates especially to the Western art world, and is employed in Portuguese, Spanish, German, French, etc. It is possible to write about contemporary art with a plain language - in any language.

Brazilian journalist Heloisa Fischer is a member of PLAIN and founder of Comunica Simples, the branch of PLAIN in Brazil that promotes clear communication in Brazilian Portuguese. She explains: "As a social cause, it exists in several countries since the 1940s, initially in the United States and UK. It mobilizes public employees, civils and consumers in favor of the right of understanding information which guide them in their daily basis" (Fischer 2020, page). She argues that from the 1970s to 1990s, the PLAIN movement spread across the world. In Brazil, Plain Language is translated as *Linguagem Simples* [simple language] and in Portugal, it is translated as *Linguagem Clara* [clear language], where projects like Claro.pt or the dictionary for clear language exist (palavrasclaras.pt). To her, most of the time the problem is with the text and not the person who reads it. "Be it for lack of empathy with readers or use of too many linguistic elements which make reading more difficult, texts can assume a segregative character and promote social exclusion because of the use language" (Fischer 2020)[6].

[6] Author's traslation

The *Manual de Lenguaje Claro* [Manual for Plain Language] shows that the use of plain language is a matter of public concern for the Mexican Government. It was published by the state in 2007 aiming to highlight the importance of public employees – who evidently speak Spanish, communicating with civilians using a clear and objective language. The document even mentions a "citizen language", and shares a step-by-step guide on which words to use and not to use, which target audience to have in mind when writing a text or talking, the ideal length of sentences and paragraphs, etc.

Accessible Web points out that the average American is considered to have a reading level equivalent to a teenager at about 12 to 14 years old. "The U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Literacy found that some 32 million adults in the United States can't read, and approximately 50% of Americans read at an 8th-grade readability level or lower" (Barnhart 2021). Another interesting data point shared by the Center for Plain Language is that the British government encourages content writers to write for an age nine reading level. "Their reasoning for this is that around the age of nine, children stop reading common words and just recognize their shape."

The Center for Plain Language shares a five-step checklist to guide writers through the plain language process: 1) identify and describe the target audience; 2) Structure the content to guide the reader through it; 3) Write the content in plain language; 4) Use information design to help readers see and understand; 5) work with the target user groups to test the design and content. In the third step, they indicate that writing the content in plain language is keeping it short and to the point, using a conversational, rather than legal or bureaucratic tone, and using words the audience knows, among other suggestions. (Center for Plain Language, n.d.).

Such conventions indeed play a role in raising awareness of how important it is to care about the use of language to communicate clearly, but there is no such thing as a formula or how-to guide that is going to prove the accessibility or readability of a text. The preoccupation and intention to use clear language are per se important when writing a text. There is no right way to prove the effectiveness and clarity of a given text, but asking the reader if he or she clearly understood what is being communicated is one place to start. In

her book *How to Write about Contemporary Art* Gilda Williams calls "explaining" texts the ones that serve to bring the public closer to the artworks.

> "'Explaining' texts are meant to assist anyone approaching the work, whether for the first time or for the hundredth. You, the writer, are not asked to speculate excessively on its meaning, much less presume the viewer's reaction. 'Explaining' texts usually succeed when facts and ideas are communicated plainly, and specialists and non-specialists alike find them informative—rather than incomprehensible or patronizing" (2014, 21).

Williams highlights that such "explaining" texts are more necessary in contemporary art than ever before.

> "Unlike ancient objects, recent art does not beg a written explanation because its distant meaning has dimmed over time, but in order for viewers to tap into an artwork's conceptual or material entry points, and appreciate its contribution(s) to contemporary culture and thought" (ibid., 25).

To her, in this day and age, an art writer can play the important role of facilitating how the public approaches contemporary art in view of the fact that, being an art connoisseur, the art writer can elucidate and interpret mundane, temporal, or urgent discussions an artwork triggers. "In this scenario, an art-writer is a conduit, possessing specialist information that enables her to link unfamiliar artworks to a curious audience and pin down an artwork's potential meanings" (ibid.).

In the case of Maurizio Cattelan's banana mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, replicating jargon such as "conceptual artwork" and "Readymade" in texts published about the artwork is an obvious barrier to understanding the work for readers who are not acquainted with these concepts. This vocabulary only contributes to validating the belief that contemporary art is difficult to understand, "not for me", or that it is "just a joke", or "a farse".

The artwork brings many questions to the table, and notoriously resulted in significant backlash against the contemporary art world in the press. Art writers could help ease this backlash by answering some of the questions the public might have, such as the fact that whoever buys the work is acquiring a piece of paper with the concept of the work and by explaining – in a non-patronizing way – that in contemporary art ideas are more important than the object itself. They could also propose food-for-though provocations such as if a

banal object like a banana can raise so many questions about art, the art world, and the art market, then the artwork itself is already achieving what the artist intended it to do.

While we can certainly understand that writing about art does not necessarily mean unveiling everything about a work of art, we cannot accept that lack of clarity could be good writing at all. Of course, some mystery, some vague suggestions of meanings, some well-chosen stylistic and rhetorical strategies may enrich the reader's experience of art; but not at the cost of clarity.

What constitutes a good art writer is writing meaningful and compelling texts, yet without a professorial approach to the readers. It is not about showing the writer knows a lot, and will be guiding and teaching the reader; this empathic writing is about walking hand-in-hand with the audiences, making them feel comfortable to learn, discover, and be inspired:

> "Good art writers never sound as if they are struggling to cook up something to say, or miming words spoken before (by someone else), or clinging to jargon to weigh their words with gravitas. Intimidating the reader is never their goal. Good art-writing knows that art is meaningful; therefore meaning does not have to be forced upon it, only discovered, enjoyed, and put into plain words" (Williams 2014, 235).

3.2 Can you put yourself in my place?

American artist, curator and writer Cara Ober openly advocates for the use of plain language to write about contemporary art in an empathic way.

> "Art history is currently being made all over the world and I want to write about the art and artists of my time as they actually are—complex, passionate, frustrating, and inspiring—through the use of accessible, conversational, and inspired language that democratizes and unites, questions and argues, but does not obscure meaning in order to posture as the one percent of the one percent of a self-imposed and hermetic arts intelligentsia" (2019).

Communicating about art aiming to create bonds between art and reader is per se a kind of empathetic writing. This idea is defended by Cara Ober later in her text:

> "Developing a vocabulary in literary, conversational, or creative diction is an opportunity for empathy and connection within cultural communities and spaces. Skilled art writing offers opportunities to rigorously examine who we are as individuals, communities, and collectively, to serve as a fertile ground for understanding, relationships, and growth." (ibid.).

Art itself is already recognized as a tool that can build empathy between people. Bringing people closer to art is creates more opportunities for them to exercise empathy through art.

In the article *Art and empathy: Four thought leaders explain the connection*, Terry Wu, a researcher on empathy and neuroscience to empower leaders, explains that we are born with an innate capacity to feel other people's pain as if it is our own pain. "But at the same time, we are very selective in whom we feel empathy towards. We feel very strong empathy towards those who we consider as "us," but very little empathy towards those who we consider as "them." (in Curry 2021). When asked about how he thinks art impacts the way we make decisions, he observes:

> "Art can be a powerful way for us to gain a better understanding of human emotions and stories. It gives us a unique lens to look at artists' inner worlds. It trains our brains to slow down and think more rationally, instead of emotionally. It restores our capacity to connect with others. Art plays a unique role in re-establishing humanity in this technology-dominated world." (ibid.).

The role of art writing to enhance the engagement of people with art is consequently to favor opportunities in which they can exercise empathy through art. Writers, critics, journalists, bloggers, amongst other communicators, can expand the potential of art to create empathy, actively working to bring their discourse closer to the public through accessible writing.

This motivation for writers to create empathy is clarified in the following paragraph from the blog article *Discover how to show empathy in writing and why it's important:*

> "As writers, copywriters, copyeditors and content marketers, it's our job to communicate information in an effective way. One of the most effective ways is through storytelling, which can help to form strong bonds and connections among people because it gives us a glimpse into the lives of others. In other words, it helps us to understand the feelings (wants/needs) of another person. Sounds a lot like empathy, doesn't it?" (The Search Guru 2018).

In 2017, the Minneapolis Institute of Art founded the Center for Empathy and the Visual Arts, which is based on the premise that "art has the power to open up our minds, introducing us to the stories of people across space and time. And that experiencing these stories helps us connect not only across cultural differences but also with ourselves—we better understand our shared values. This is empathy, and we all have the capacity to be

empathetic." (Curry, 2021). As the director of the center, curator Karleen Gardner believes that art inspires wonder and curiosity and connects us to something bigger than ourselves.

> "Art is an expression of the human condition and this medium allows and encourages us to experience the emotions and perspectives of other people past and present, including those of the artist who created it, the person/people depicted in the artwork, as well as those of the people you experience and discuss it with" (ibid.).

The Museum of the Person [Museu da Pessoa] in Brazil is another interesting example of a project guided by the power of empathy to fight intolerance. Founded in 1991 in São Paulo, the institution is a digital and collaborative museum whose collection is formed by stories of people. Anyone can tell their story, register, preserve and share it with others. Its mission is "to transform every single story into world heritage" (my translation) and its values are "Listening. Democratization of memory. Protagonism. Collaboration. Social Justice". In the study published by the museum in January 2021, they created an online and open survey to measure the impact of the museum on its audience. It was answered by 87 visitors of the museum: 98.9% of them responded that they have "expanded their empathy towards people in their diversity". All of them have "enlarged their understanding about social issues which lead to intolerance, like discrimination and inequality". It is also interesting to know that the collection of stories of people which can be accessed by anyone also has helped visitors of the museum to improve the "quality of their hearing" according to 97.7% of the visitors surveyed (Museu da Pessoa 2021).

3.3 Is it for me?

Using empathic writing is a way to connect to broader audiences. Importantly here, we are concerned with audiences in the plural, not a singular audience. It is evident that people are not the same and have different motivations and opinions toward the arts (and therefore make up a variety of audiences). Analyzing the audiences of contemporary art venues would require a complete dissertation dedicated to the subject, as well as compelling qualitative and/or quantitative research. This, however, is not the aim of this dissertation. But I consider it important to briefly explain who I am referring to when I defend that plain language can bring "general audiences" closer to contemporary art.

As I am not referring to one specific group of people, geographic territory, or context, it makes it more difficult to define these general audiences. Therefore, I refer to studies dedicated to the analysis of art audiences in order to bolster and explore this concept. In the report *Audiences for Visual Arts*, The Audience Agency writes that visual arts audiences in the United Kingdom are (un)defined by the following characteristics:

> "Half of the visual arts visitors belong to the highest culturally engaged Audience Spectrum groups. […] Visual art audiences reflect ethnic makeup of the English population more closely than most other forms. […] Visitors are looking for reflection, to learn something and to be inspired […]" (2019).

The study made with British art galleries in 2019 shows that half of visual arts attendees represent the highest culturally engaged audience spectrum segments. "These audiences are likely to participate in other cultural activities and be highly educated professionals who are relatively affluent compared to the wider population" (Ibid.). Data indicates that over half of gallery goers are highly engaged in cultural activity as part of their lifestyle and are likely to be open to becoming advocates and supporters. They belong to the top audience spectrum groups: 20% of these people belong to the group of Metroculturals, defined as "prosperous, liberal, urbanites interested in a very wide cultural spectrum"; 19% are Experience Seekers, defined as "highly active, diverse, social and ambitious, engaging with arts on a regular basis"; 13% are Dormitory Dependables, "suburban and small towners interested in mainstream arts." The other 12% are Commuterland Culturebuffs which, are defined as "affluent and professional consumers of culture" (ibid.)

The article *Do open day events develop art museum audiences?*, references a handful of different scholars in order to define museum audiences in Portugal, from which I highlight some relevant information:

> "Museum visitors tend to be well educated and earn higher incomes than the average population (Andreasen 1991; Hood 1993, 1995; Kirchberg 1996; Kolb 2005), and there is a strong positive correlation between education and museum attendance (DiMaggio and Useem 1978; Kawashima 1999; Kirchberg 1996). […], university graduates comprise the largest group of museum visitors (Colbert 2003; Kolb 2005) and may represent more than 70 per cent of contemporary art museums' audiences (Colbert 2003)" (Barbosa & Brito, 2010).

A study about audiences of fourteen museums in Portugal developed in 2014 and 2015 [Estudo Público de Museus Nacionais – EPMN], says that more that 67% of those who

visit museums have higher education. "Overall, audiences follow the characteristics already known of art museums […]: higher education and professionally qualified, young, and a slight predominance of women (56%)" (Património Cultural República Portuguesa 2016)[7].

This backdrop scenario of these studies confirms the common knowledge that consumers of art are individuals who have more education and higher incomes than the average population. These individuals are already interested in culture and arts. With that in mind, I ask: what about those who are not frequent visitors to art venues? How is it possible to turn a non-visitor into a visitor? How can their attention be grabbed? How can they be motivated to visit an art space for the first time?

"Converting intenders [non-visitors] into visitors implies identifying impediments that can be influenced or even eliminated by the museum" (Hayes and Slater 2002, quoted in Barbosa & Brito, 2010). There is a wide range of impediments that can keep a non-visitor away from a museum. Practical aspects such as ticket pricing, accessibility to the venue because of distance or transport, or lack of time, are paramount reasons. Other obstacles more specifically related to the art world, such as not knowing what to wear or how to behave inside a museum, are not unimportant. Protocols followed by museums, galleries and art fairs are strong reasons why visitors may not feel comfortable inside those venues. As formerly discussed in this dissertation, questions of power relations permeate these spaces and are frequent reasons why some people prefer to stir clear from them. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will not be discussing all of these ideas, but focusing on the ways in which language can encourage audiences to approach (or stir clear from) contemporary art.

As an art writer myself, I believe that art can transform non-visitors into visitors by reaching them outside of art spaces. Plain language should be used on wall texts, press releases, or articles in an art magazine, but they obviously will not reach non-visitors, exactly because these audiences do not attend art venues. Therefore, writing about contemporary art with plain language is also with the goal to reach those who have never

[7] Author's translation

visited a museum, but could be interested to do it if something or someone caught their attention and motivated them. This is the audience I aim to reach when writing for Bigorna, the example of this dissertation. Plain language is used to communicate to non-visitors that could possibly be transformed into visitors. Having this potential audience in mind when writing a text guides me to communicate to those who do not have any vocabulary around art, and still invite them to come closer to art spaces.

Museologist, cultural manager and executive director of the project Acesso Cultura, Maria Vlachou promotes the use of plain language in Portugal, especially when it comes to disseminating culture and arts in the country. In her text "To whom we communicate?", she argues that to use clear language is to aim to communicate with people who are not specialists.

> "We are habituated to talking amongst peers and we reproduce this kind of speech even when we are talking to non-specialists […]. We do it because we are afraid that, if we communicate in a more clear way, our colleagues might think we are not good enough, or that we infantilize and banalize our discourse" (2020)[8].

To her, besides the inefficacy of this type of speech, it directly affects relationships with people. "We need an empathetic, natural and human communication to build relationships between people" (ibid.).

Other groups of people – the ones who already have various levels of interest in contemporary art – will also benefit from this. It does not matter how much one knows about art and contemporary art, there will always be more to learn and more questions to raise because contemporary art challenges what we know and take as for granted. Writing with plain language should not be confused with over-simplification or superficiality. Hoa Loranger, VP at computer user interface and user experience consulting firm Nielsen Norman group explains: "A common misguided objection I hear about plain language is that it dumbs down content and thus insults intelligent readers" (2017). Elsewhere, Loranger and her colleague Kate Moran write about using plain language in writing web content for specialized audiences:

> "like general web readers, highly educated professionals want content that is digestible, concise, and scannable — that is, formatted according to the rules of

[8] Author's translation

> writing for the web. The major difference in preference, however, lies in the substance of the content (topics covered and the level of detail) and the importance of credibility" (2017).

As opposed to what one may think, writing for those who do not know anything about contemporary art is even more difficult than communicating with those who are considered insiders or connoisseurs. It is a challenge to not oversimplify or rarify an idea. "Writing in plain language isn't easy, but it pays off in positive results." (Plain Language Action and Information Network. n. d.). It takes time and knowledge to rework, refine, and adjust language to transform complex concepts into palpable and tangible written content. This exercise is, at the same time, pleasurable and laborious. Resorting to International Art English or Artspeak can be less demanding.

This idea is defended by the Brazilian journalist Heloise Fischer. In her text *It is only accessible if you can understand*, she writes that only 12% of Brazilian people can read and comprehend compelling and complex texts (INAF Brasil 2018)[9], therefore the use of *Linguagem Simples* [simple language] is imperative – but laborious as well. "I estimate that a text written in simple language which is synthetic, has no linguistic elements that could make reading more complicated, and contains every important bit of information for communication takes three times longer to write" (2020).

Returning now to the importance of plain communication outside of art venues, the study *Understanding Audiences for Contemporary Arts* explains that: "arts listings are available and accessible beyond the venue and the regular audience could also entice new audience members, particularly if the events are explained in a clear and appealing way that does not depend too much on prior knowledge and attendance" (Pitts and Price 2019, 13).

The handbook goes on to state that "descriptions and images of events and venues can be a barrier if they are not explicitly inclusive, and so feel 'very white' or generate fear of a 'clique of performance people' in which newcomers will not be welcome: 'I've not chosen to go to because [...] I don't know how comfortable I would feel there' (ibid., 17).

[9] Author's translation

Let's take a family that rarely or never goes to museums as an example. What would make them choose to visit a museum on a lazy Sunday? The supposed museum is free to visit and located in the neighborhood. But this family does not feel invited to spend the day inside this museum, they do not feel like they belong in that space. As mentioned above, a handful of factors could cause this family to shy away from the museum. From financial aspects and mobility, to questions of representation and inclusivity, there can be many complex and important factors at play. For the purposes of this dissertation I am focusing on communication and how this museum could use it to make this family feel welcomed. Of course, they could still hesitate: "Is it for me?", "Should I give it a try?". Even so, I do believe that if communication surrounding an exhibition was talking *to* them, inviting them to enter that space, chances are higher that this family would go for it – and perhaps talk about what they just saw over dinner.

3.4 Let's talk about art!

Art writing is present on the news – in the form of journalistic articles, critiques, essays, agendas, or interviews, and in other media such as exhibition catalogues, press releases, curatorial texts, wall texts, as well as a handful of other genres as explained by Vorstermans:

> "Art Writing is a very broad field, from artist's texts to journalism, to exhibition reviews or art reviews or writing on art market developments, to poetry speculative essayistic texts, to deeply researched academic texts. Academic texts, art criticism, and journalism have always been embedded in institutional structures, from universities, art schools, and academies, to (art) newspapers and other 'institutionalized' platforms" (in Patty & Haylock 2021, 236).

Moreover, communicating about art is not only limited to written expression. The hypothesis of this dissertation is that plain language can be used to approximate audiences to contemporary art. Any kind of text is taken into account for this purpose – be it written or spoken.

French literary theorist, essayist, critic and philosopher Roland Barthes is among the most well-known thinkers to acknowledge text as a wider concept than written content. In his

essay *From Work to Text*, Barthes proposed the idea that text is not a book, but the ideas themselves: when we approach a text we are less interested in the format and more interested in the content. Barthes theorized that a text can go way beyond literature, it could be any text (1977). He raised questions in the following direction: if text is something that communicates in written words, why should this approach not be used for other formats that also communicate, such as images, pieces of visual art, theatre or even billboards?

In short, his concept democratizes theory and analyzes any piece of culture. This concept of text unleashes a piece of culture from its temporal specificity. It suggests that it can change meaning over time the way society changes, and across different societies of the globe. In culture studies, the idea of textuality is broader that the idea of a literary text. Cultural texts evoke the idea that our world is full of texts, or things that we humans have created. "If a literary text is the product of an individual author, a cultural text is the product of an entire society, or at least a sub-culture within a society" (Wilson, n.d.).

Barthes' theory adds interesting insights to this dissertation in the way it has changed what was understood for the role of audiences, and how they engage with cultural texts. His ideas are aligned with those of poststructuralism, which understands language is less perfect in expressing our thoughts and ideas than we might initially want to think it is. A poststructuralist approach asks what this means for the practice of analyzing cultural texts and questions whether it is even possible to arrive at a definite interpretation of a given film, book or cultural text. It also questions if it is possible to arrive at an objective truth given how our biases surrounding race, gender, class, and personal beliefs might shape our understanding of the world.

> "In the Post-Structuralist approach to textual analysis, the reader replaces the author as the primary subject of inquiry and, without a central fixation on the author, Post-Structuralists examine other sources for meaning (e.g., readers, cultural norms, other literature, etc), which are therefore never authoritative, and promise no consistency. A reader's culture and society, then, share at least an equal part in the interpretation of a piece to the cultural and social circumstances of the author." (The basis of Philosophy. n. d.)

I take a poststructuralist approach to text here to illustrate the experiences audiences have with both a work of art and a given text (written or spoken) that talks about the artwork. Audiences are not only receivers or consumers, but active producers of potential meanings of the work of art and of the text. In *The Death of the Author*, Barthes writes:

> "Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (1977, 148).

The role of the writer is that of mediator, who offers tools and information for each person to absorb, elaborate, and transform according to their individual perspective, background, and knowledge. If audiences agree or not, like it or not, is another matter – the mediator can assist people in forming their own opinions and arguments based on the information the mediator provides.

Barthes upheld the idea that text has no definite meaning. Its contents have an infinite variety of meanings. To him, different readers will have different interpretations of the same piece of literature. In the same book, he stated that the most important aspect of a text is not the individual that created that text, but rather the effects that it has on readers. If more importance is placed on the author than on the text, it restrains free circulation of the work, free composition, free decomposition, and recomposition (Barthes, 1977).

About post-structuralism and contemporary art, Grant H. Kester explains:

> "We encounter in contemporary art discourse a set of assumptions about the expressive autonomy of the artist, the hermeneutic function of the art work, the cognitive capacities of the viewer, and the relationship of art practice to broader social and political movements that have been heavily infuenced by post-structuralist critical theory and the longer history of modernist aesthetics" (2011, 58).

As explained above, art can be a powerful tool for creating empathy. Not only writing but also talking about art is a path for creating connections between audiences and subjects. That being the case, when I refer to language in art writing, I also refer to talking about art. Similarly, when I refer to text, the spoken word is also included. Spoken language is paramount and in some cases an even more energetic and vigorous way to communicate

about contemporary art and bring people closer to it. A compassionate approach to speaking about art helps audiences connect with each other in a humane way, as opposed to a distanced or even standardized approach. In-person activities and meet-ups such as guided tours, talks, roundtable discussions, and classes are extremely important examples of accessible ways of sharing and talking about contemporary art.

These environments that connect readers to the subject with a narrative is referred to as storytelling. Immersive and inclusive stories trigger emotions, create curiosity, and show the relevance of that specific subject, thus bringing the reader closer to the topic discussed. Storytelling is achieved through the use of words, pictures, sound or video, and can be anything from simple to complex presentations. Personification is a notable characteristic of storytelling and is significant when it comes to creating a bond between audiences and subjects. For the National Storytelling Network, "Storytelling is the interactive art of using words and actions to reveal the elements and images of a story while encouraging the listener's imagination" (n. d.).

The text *Keeping the Traditional of African Storytelling Alive* discusses specifically the fact that African countries are rooted in oral cultures (Utley, n.d.). Storytelling is a longstanding tradition in a variety of African cultures and functions as a way of passing on and maintaining cultural values, methods of survival, religious beliefs, wisdom, and knowledge.

> "Storytelling is a shared event with people sitting together, listening, and participating in accounts of past deeds, beliefs, taboos, and myths. Repetition of the language and rhythm are two important characteristics of oral storytelling in Africa. Storytellers repeat words, phrases, and stanzas. The use of repetition makes the stories easy to understand and recall from memory. When the audience is familiar with the stories, they actively participate as they learn important aspects of their culture" (ibid.).

It is clear that not all storytellers in Africa are professionals, although people only develop excellence in the art of storytelling with time, age, and experience. "African storytellers are performers who entertain, inspire, and educate their audience. They know how to captivate the audience with more than just words. The storytellers use gestures, singing, facial expression, and impersonations to arouse the audience." Discussing storytelling in the

African past and present is not the scope of this research, however it is important to point out that storytelling as we know today has its roots in the rituals and longstanding traditions of African culture.

In his text *Orality, the future of art?* published in 1968, the Portuguese multidisciplinary artist, art critic, and director Ernesto de Souza argues that spoken word is the future of visual art. He predicted that mass media and technology would mediate every single aesthetic experience, which would also bring a more humane approach to the arts. "We can image the future as the overtaking of what limits us: the word will break every the original silence […] Naturally, humanly, the future will be richer, more infinite […]"(2011, 37)[10]. As he wrote this text in 1968, Ernesto de Souza showed excitement for the revolutions television and computers would bring to oral discussions about artworks. At that moment he was arguing that oral communication would even "revive the primitive force in mass civilization" (ibid., 39), meaning that new communication technologies would bring back past oral traditions, albeit in a new form.

Storytelling is present not only in physical encounters but also digitally. Whereas on-site gatherings have restrictions of space, online encounters, social media, video streaming, and podcasts have a hypothetically unlimited reach, and therefore work well in favor of accessibility. It is common knowledge that such communication channels are extremely important in this day and age when it comes to content creation, language, education, and information sources.

Bernard R. Robin defines digital storytelling as:

> "combining the art of telling stories with a variety of digital multimedia, such as images, audio, and video. Just about all digital stories bring together some mixture of digital graphics, text, recorded audio narration, video and music to present information on a specific topic. […] The stories are typically just a few minutes long and have a variety of uses, including the telling of personal tales, the recounting of historical events, or as a means to inform or instruct on a particular topic" (2011).

These digitally presented narratives are to him an effective instructional tool for educators and facilitators in the learning process of students.

[10] Author's translation

Digital storytelling is a very powerful tool for constructing meaningful narratives, capturing audiences' attention, sharing dynamic content, combining visual images with text and sound, facilitating discussions around a certain topic, promoting engagement, inviting people to ask questions and express opinions, and more. Engagement, participation, and the culture of sharing and liking can be important components in the effectiveness of how messaging is shared and understood.

Videos, podcasts, posts, blogs, online classes, and live interviews, among other forms of producing and sharing content, should and must be used to talk about art today. The idea of connecting with the reader/viewer, acting in the interest of the reader with real emotion, and establishing a connection with the subject at hand, in modern times, is to take into account everything new technologies have to offer as a form of impacting readers' understanding and information-gathering. When the audiences can sense that a real, individual person is presenting a topic, it helps to create connections between audiences and the subject discussed, and this can be easily done online, during live videos or recordings that create an instant connection between those who speak and those who watch.

Storytelling can be developed by anyone, from educators, writers, and journalists, to any user of social media. As the practical example of this dissertation Bigorna, is concerned, storytelling is not only directly related to the digital realm but also closely attached to journalism. By making use of empathetic language and storytelling to talk about contemporary art, journalists play the part of cultural mediators.

4. JORNALISM AS A MEDIATION TOOL FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

Who? What? Where? How? Why? These are the five questions that every journalist should answer right in the first paragraph of their text and are meant to be clear, condensed, attained to facts and impartial (Coutinho 2018). This so-called lead, which catches the reader's interest at the opening of every news story, is what traditional hard news journalism coverage preached. This should then be followed by an objective text, with relevant, new information. Celebrated journalists have done it all over the world. This has never been, however, the *only* right way to make journalism. Writers in the 1960s rectified this idea with what they referred to as literary journalism (ibid.). Today, in 2023, news is shared and consumed in so many different media, supports and formats that writing leads have become only one of the countless ways to start a text. However, the second part of traditional hard news journalism – impartiality –has long been proven impossible to achieve (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019).

Journalism is a process of making stories. The journalist is not just a reporter who describes a fact, but a person who has a background, opinions, and tastes. From hard news and coverage of deaths and crimes, to activist journalism and cultural journalism, the colorful palette of everything the field encompasses today is, after all, the process of telling stories. Journalists share perceptions or, better said, versions, of a story. Today, there are plenty of tools to make stories more appealing, palatable, and interesting. New technologies and social media constantly encourage new approaches to journalism, and storytelling has become increasingly involved, immersive, and engaging (Coutinho 2018).

In this process, emotions are acceptable. Showing passion can even be desirable. Sharing personal points of view are a reflex to connecting with audiences. The idea of following a humane company is much more attractive than following anonymous individuals. Engaging with lively and energic journalistic coverages is incomparable to watching reporters reading teleprompters with a mechanical and unnatural posture.

I am a journalist: if I were writing this dissertation using complicated vocabulary, in a cold text full of jargon, you, reader (assuming that not all of you are experts in art mediation

and art journalism), would have to either slow down your reading speed, read it out loud, or read it twice. Possibly, defining unfamiliar words with the use of a dictionary would be also necessary. Creating connections with your own references and background could be more challenging.

At this point, after an introduction and three chapters you, the reader, would probably be tired, and uninvolved, although one of my aims with this research is that *you* – regardless of your disciplinary background – also get closer to contemporary art. While in this dissertation, my subject topic is using plain language to bring people closer to contemporary art, I also intend to build this text in a palatable way. This does not mean I neglect or disrespect the academic writing. The hope is that I can better relate to *you*. And we still have a few more pages to go.

4.1. Journalism or literature?

> "Traditional journalism insists on a kind of objectivity that does not exist. Journalists are human beings. Human beings have opinions. Human beings have antipathies. Human beings have sometimes had a very unsatisfactory breakfast. There are no objective human beings, and therefore there can be no objective journalism. There are those who admit this; there are others who don't". (Timmbern in Poerksen B., 2010, 23).

Literary Journalism admits this: it is honest about its subjectivity. Also called New Journalism, it is a non-fiction and creative form of writing which exists between literature and journalism: "The genre of telling true stories goes by many names: narrative journalism, new journalism, literary journalism, creative nonfiction, feature writing, the nonfiction novel, documentary narrative. […] This genre […] challenges audiences as well as practitioners" (Kramer & Call, 2007, xv). While the compassionate approach a journalist has towards the content of the coverage is acknowledged in this type of coverage, the commitment they have to the story and to the readers remains the same as in traditional journalism.

"By definition, a good journalist is able to measure the weight and complexity of the story and deliver a result that is pertinent and respectful to both the subjects of his analysis and

his readers" (2008, 92), writes Manuel João de Carvalho Coutinho in his PhD dissertation titled *21st century Literary Journalism: Narrative Techniques and the Concept of Plot and Hero*. The practice of literary journalism is important to this research to the extent that, on the one hand, it acknowledges the emotions and subjectivity of the journalist and, on the other hand, it is attached to the core values of journalism. The example of this research – the platform Bigorna, which will be scrutinized in the next chapter, has these premises at its core.

Literary or New Journalism is not fiction. It is attached to facts. However, it focuses on the way these facts are transmitted to audiences with an understanding that the journalist "is able to create a story in a more complex way than just the delivery of mere information, as the reader indulges on the puzzle pieces to form his own assertion of a certain event." (ibid., 69). We can say that, as with traditional journalism, literary journalism aims to inform, but inform by the means of a good story, ideally approached in a way that touches both the writer and the reader. The end result is always the same: "to create a better and more informed society where its citizens are then subsequently more apt to fully exercise their rights and duties as members of a democratic nation" (ibid., 48).

There are some common elements that fiction and journalism share, such as the existence of a plot and structure. Both seem to tell stories of different realities, lives, and individuals. Both are grounded in context while needing / relying on characters, time, and space. But there is an obvious difference between the genres: journalism is always concerned with non-fiction, while literature creates stories that can be fictional, non-fictional, or even a mixture of both (ibid.).

> **"**This results in a different assessment of the news, enacting in the reader real emotion and thus establishing a connection with the article in hand, which ends up going in line with the idea, in modern times, of journalism as a form impacting its readers towards knowledge and information" (ibid., 101).

The most important values of journalism are always at the forefront of literary journalism as well. Journalism is attained to facts; it is committed to tell a true story. Journalism tries to achieve the truth, nonetheless journalism and truth are two separate things:

> "The matter of fact is that what is reported is what was investigated and evidenced to the best of the journalist's assessment. Journalism always takes a point of view – the point of view of the offended, the account from the police, the report from a witness –

> and what it can do is use conflicting points of view in hopes of delivering more information on the subject" (ibid., 105).

The connections between truth and journalism, as well as the developments and changes in journalism history, deserves its own thesis and investigation, something that will not be examined much further in this study. Nevertheless, the following paragraph by Kovach and Rosenstiel provides a helpful overview on these topics:

> "By the beginning of the twentieth century, journalists began to realize that realism and reality – or accuracy and truth – were not so easily equated. In 1920, Walter Lippmann used the terms truth and news interchangeably in his book Liberty and the News. But in 1922, in Public Opinion, he wrote: 'News and truth are not the same thing… The function of news is to signalize an event,' or make people aware of it. 'The function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality upon which men can act.' By 1938, journalism textbooks were beginning to question how truthful the news could really be." (2014, 53).

Journalism always pays attention to what is relevant. Studying what makes something relevant in journalism would demand the development of a dissertation. For the purpose of this research, one can say as an introductory note that the so-called "news values" are some characteristics that make something newsworthy. These values are not strictly determined, however some of them can be enumerated: "impact, timeliness, prominent, close to home, conflict, unexpected, current and human interest" (Owen Spencer-Thomas). All of them are taken seriously in hard news, and approached in different ways in other types of journalism.

Novelty is also important in the journalistic field. It relates to an unprecedented event or a surprising story, but mainly it concerns an unsuspected angle to approach a fact, person, or topic. The ability to condense a story is a fingerprint of journalism. In theory, journalists must be concise, clear, and synthetic. "Stories are not made with the inclusion of all the "known-details", and a good investigative journalist – just like a writer – understands what and when to cut certain elements so as not to bother the reader with unnecessary scenes and details" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014, 80). This goes back to the fact that because editing is natural to their work, journalists tell a version of the facts.

Fact-checking is another essential value. Verifying information is an effort to avoid mistakes and determine the accuracy and truthfulness of a journalistic coverage. Journalists can do it themselves, but an extra pair of eyes is always advisable, therefore editors are normally required for this task. In some cases, usually in big news media companies, the text is proofread and fact-checked by specialized professionals. It "has become a significant journalistic weapon in the fight against disinformation" (Kyriakidou, 2022).

Bigorna, a journalistic platform for contemporary art, follows all these values. Storytelling and literary journalism are driving forces of its journalistic coverage about art as it seeks to bring the subject closer to audiences. All of this is developed primarily in the digital realm: it could not happen otherwise.

4.2. That is the way I see it!

Journalism is in constant change and is clearly shaped by and to the society or community in which it is embedded. Broadly speaking, technologies and social media have brought dramatic changes to the journalism all over the world:

> "Certainly, the traditional media must literally adapt or die, as what is now being born is a new style of news, delivered and consumed differently. What is still uncertain is whether the core values of journalism are going to survive in this new world. And perhaps it is also uncertain whether they truly need to survive and whether we can have a vibrant democracy undergirded by an informed citizenry without traditional news" (Jones 2009, 178).

These dramatic changes in journalism are especially connected to the digital realm as discussed by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, who proposes the idea of an "emotional turn" in journalism studies. She explains the "turn" is not to suggest a paradigm shift or a major revolution in the field, but to point out that "the relationship between journalism and emotion represents a rapidly developing area of inquiry which opens up for new research agendas, with particular relevance for the study of digital journalism" (2019, 16).

To the author, this has led to an increasingly nuanced investigation of the role of emotion in the production of and audience engagement with journalism. In her essay "An Emotional Turn in Journalism Studies?", she argues that technological changes have

stimulated the transformation of journalistic practices, especially when it comes to the blurred barriers between the journalist and audience. Social media, videos, streaming and other digital tools are evidentially shaped by interaction and dialogue, breaking boundaries between who produces news and who consumes it: "Such sharing is often informed by and gives voice to emotional concerns shaped by lived experience, breaking down conventional binary distinctions between public and private spheres" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 18).

The era of digital journalism has contributed to a rapid transformation in the role of emotion across these contexts. "At the most fundamental level, the new media ecology has brought the fundamental category of news audiences/consumers into question through the drastic expansion in opportunities for ordinary people to shape the news," explains the author (ibid., 29). The emergence of citizen journalism and user-generated content has expanded ways of knowing, through personalized and embodied accounts of news events. Bringing this idea closer to art journalism, the subject of the present research, one can say that every visitor in an art venue can register and share their *in loco* experience in texts, photographs and videos. Anyone with an internet connection can publicly share their viewpoint about an exhibition, propose discussions around an artwork, share critiques or compliments with a gallery, a guided tour, a performance, and virtually anything that he/she saw/experienced.

Wahl-Jorgensen defends the idea that the advent of social media has stimulated the creation of affective news streams facilitated by the logic of connective actions. "These developments, in turn, have spilled over into the practice of professional journalists who are now authorized to communicate in more emotional and personal ways through an array of platforms" (2019, 29). I would say that professional journalists are not only authorized to show emotions, as it is expected of them to do it. Giving personal grounded opinions connected to their expertise, knowledge, experience, and background is fundamentally what structures social proof today in the journalistic field. The articulation between intellectual expertise and personal experience is what can make journalists authorities.

In his book *Speaking Personally: The Rise of Subjective and Confessional Journalism*, Coward writes that personal "pieces and first-person real-life stories have become ever more abundant, either written by the protagonists themselves or 'as told to' journalists. Features have become more intimate and confessional while even news stories now include many personal stories" (2013, 6). In the case of Bigorna, first-person experiences in museums, exhibitions or other art experiences are the way in which I have decided, as a journalist, to approach contemporary art. By sharing my emotions in relation to an artwork or an exhibition and adding to that important information about the artist, art history, art movements, or concepts, I hope to capture audience's attention. At a subsequent stage, by sharing my impressions grounded in years of study and work in the contemporary art world, I want to show others they can also feel – either what I feel or any other feelings – when it comes to contemporary art. This comes as an answer to the aforementioned question "Is it for me?". My aim is to make audiences understand that contemporary art is for them, if they want it to be. It can be about knowing but, most importantly, it is about feeling.

While there is a close relationship between journalism and literature which have thoroughly been studied and discussed in journalism studies, authors Stjin Postema and Mark Deuze propose that there is a confluence between the journalistic practice and the artistic practice. To them, "an arts and journalism continuum is vital to comprehend what is happening in contemporary news work" (2020, 45). The authors defend the idea that a historic and contemporary conflux of arts and journalism, along with the potential broadening of news work studies to genres and platforms primarily evaluated as artistic or cultural, suggests the relevance of a conjunctive analytical approach that allows comparing and differentiating the confluence of journalism and art.

In sum, they believe that:

> "on an arts and journalism spectrum, news forms can be pinpointed between the extremes of a straightforward, matter-of-fact, plain style news item and multi-sensory stimulating art experiences, evoking various degrees of (emotional) response towards coexisting factual and felt truths" (ibid.).

The cross-fertilization between both fields, the aesthetic values on one side and journalistic values on the other side, should not be perceived as dichotomies as they should be approached as "extremes of the same spectrum" (ibid.).

They uphold that journalism practices are very similar to the creative industries such as the art world; that democratic societies consider both crucial; and that both are "methods in culture for forming consciousness" (Adam 2006, 365). The authors also compare similarities between journalism and arts in regard to working conditions and job motivations, and they mention the fact that, to certain extent, journalism and arts have concordant ethics and epistemologies regarding truth telling and craft. "Both also have encountered disruptive economic and technological challenges in recent decades, during which practitioners' roles shifted and audience participation normalised" (Postema & Deuze, 2020).

Recent literature in journalism studies invariably highlight the fact that journalists are no longer the professionals confined to newsrooms. Journalism can be found everywhere. "The practice is seen as 'liquid' (Deuze 2008), and with no end to it. Deuze and Witschge envision "a profession in a permanent process of becoming" (2018, 177). As such, practitioners, scholars, and the audiences are no longer "inclined to define journalism in terms of limited newsroom conceptions" (Adam 2006, 345).

To Postema and Deuze, the broadening of borders regarding what is understood as a professional journalist and the flux of journalistic practice allow "comparing and differentiating the confluence of journalism and art" (Postema & Deuze, 2020). The authors give a brief overview on how arts and journalism have walked hand-in-hand throughout history, giving examples of celebrated French writers Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, Alexandre Dumas, and Émile Zola, who considered newspaper productions part of their literary repertoire. They pinpoint examples in documentary film, photojournalism, architecture, graphic design, comics, animations, theater, poetry, among others, to bolster the idea that journalists, as creative and innovative practitioners, are constantly looking for new ways to grab and maintain audience attention.

> "These examples illustrate how news workers with disparate artistic backgrounds can create multi-sensory stimulating news forms as tactile, emotional or heartfelt

> experience; the far end of the continuum thus includes as much sensory stimulating complexity as news workers are capable of producing" (ibid.).

As they are producing content, telling stories, editing facts, shedding light on this or that side, sharing opinions altogether, journalists concurrently play different parts. They find themselves in roles of "being a curator, interpreter, sense-maker, entrepreneur, innovator, designer or transmedia storyteller. Such roles require flexibility, along with creativity and aesthetic insight." (ibid.). I would add one more role to that list: journalists as mediators.

4.3. The art of building bridges

In her article "Exploring the Role of Arts Journalists as Cultural Mediators", Véronique Morin gives a clear overview on the way arts journalists stand between two different fields: the realm of art and the media. "They can be described as intermediaries who relay information about art productions from the artist to the public. From this perspective, one could consider them to be producers of cultural meaning" (2021, 12). To her, in the arts field, cultural mediators take on a role that can complement the idea of the mediating journalist.

> "A cultural mediator builds bridges between pieces of art and the audience through different strategies such as guided tours or creative workshops. They also explore the social themes evoked by the artwork. Cultural mediation offers an all-inclusive approach to art, one that invites all members of the cultural field to participate in discussions and ideas related to artwork" (ibid.).

To the author, when art journalists embrace the aspect of accessibility in their practice, it is a way to fight elitism within the art field. Nevertheless, as it was also sustained in this dissertation, she argues that "not all arts journalism practices correspond to this model" especially when it comes to art critique, which "can cultivate an inaccessibility of art". Morin goes on to explain that this might not be the best approach when it comes to reaching a large audience, an argument with which I could not agree more.

> "Therefore, in order for arts journalism to play an important part in a democratization of arts and to become more accessible to the public, descriptive and analytic texts should take up more space than art critique. Since art productions are often open to interpretation, the vision of one single critique on a piece restricts the variety of meanings available to the public" (ibid., 14).

She gives examples of cultural magazines such as the *JEU* and the *Lettres Québécoises* in which articles deconstruct a work of art to delineate political and social implications, and whose journalists bring forth artistic ideas through mass media with the prospect of inciting productive discussions. "A cultural journalist acting as a mediator would instead intend to deconstruct a work of art to delineate its political and social implications, therefore surpassing its promotion, and highlighting thoughts and debates related to the work" (ibid., 15).

She concludes her text with the following sentence: "There is a conversation to be had between arts journalists and scholars, one that needs to foster reflection and offer different strategies in order to allow arts journalism to reach its full potential" (ibid., 15). With this dissertation I, as an art journalist, am proposing to enhance this discussion with scholars, and ultimately to bring new perspectives and approaches for journalism to reach its full potential which, for me, means demystifying contemporary art and bringing it closer to everyone and anyone.

When it comes to accessibility, Maria Vlachou is a respected name in the field in Portugal. She founded the project Acesso Cultura which promotes courses, seminars, conferences, debates, and prizes in the cultural area to promote reflection and good practices in cultural access, be it physical, social or intellectual. On the website of the project, she defines accessibility as "giving equitable access to everyone along the continuum of human ability and experience. Accessibility encompasses the broader meanings of compliance and refers to how organisations make space for the characteristics that each person brings (Acesso Cultura, n.d.)." She upholds that true equality of opportunities means access must be direct, immediate, permanent, and as autonomous as possible.

According to Carmen Mörsch, a professor for art education, cultural studies scholar, and art educator, the term cultural mediation is translated from the German term "Kulturvermittlung" and the French, "médiation culturelle", which refers to "gaining and negotiating knowledge about the arts and social or scientific phenomena through exchange, reaction and creative response" (2013, 14). She explains it is not a familiar term for English speaking readers, who are more acquainted with the expression art education. In

Portuguese, "mediação cultural" is used by a niche group of people in the art and education field. "In Portuguese, too, the translation 'mediação' is an academic term (not in everyday use) that refers to 'the negotiation of media meanings between producers and consumers'" (Wiencek 2019, 23).

> The term cultural mediation is more precise than art education, since it is "evoking questions of negotiation which are at the heart of working between artistic objects, institutions, their social contexts and the people who encounter them. Where 'education' or 'educator' more frequently connote involvement with the formal education sector, the term cultural mediation also allows practitioners to imagine themselves as part of a larger spectrum of cultural workers across artistic disciplines working in a variety of cultural and social realms" (ibid.).

Art journalists are one of the professionals included in this larger spectrum of cultural workers and mediators.

Cultural mediation is nowadays a highly regarded aspect inside cultural institutions such as museums, art centers, and independent venues. It serves to stabilize and legitimize those cultural institutions, since it provides them with an audience and represents their interest to the outside world. On the other hand, the author explains that cultural mediation reminds the art system and its protagonists of the permanent necessity of building bridges between the inside and the outside of the art world. "It also constitutes a permanent source of disturbance: simply by existing, it reminds people of a promise never yet realized, seeing the arts as a public good" (Mörsch 2013, 36).

Cultural mediators are (amongst) the ones breaking the elitism and hierarchies present in the art system on one side, and bring the audience closer to this same art system on the other side, by providing the space for questioning and dialogue. Cultural mediation is the safe space for doubts, for trying to understand, for a more humane approach in art institutions. It is where learning and education are most obviously present:

> "Cultural mediation, for its part, is not founded solely in the production of culture and the arts: it is also anchored in the educational field, another forum in which the hegemony is created, criticized and modified. Thus, in every situation, cultural mediation faces the choice of whether to confirm and reproduce existing hegemonic structures or to distance itself from them and transform them" (ibid., 38).

Cultural mediation is based on critical thinking and questioning, and so is journalism, as discussed in the first part of this chapter. Journalists are also those who question existing hegemonic structures and transform them.

In her text "Why Mediate Art?", Maria Lind explains that mediation is "essentially about creating contact surfaces between works of art, curated projects, and people, about various forms and intensities of communicating about and around art" (2013, 103). Her text highlights the fact that art mediation is very broad and allows for a wider variety of modes of approaching exchanges among art, institutions, and the outside world. To the curator, it is important to always rethink new ways of mediating art, since most of the methods we use today "have been modelled upon modern art, which functioned in radically different ways than contemporary practice" (ibid., 105). Therefore, she believes that what we should call for is "different types of mediation, and in other contexts" (ibid., 105). The author does not mention journalism as an example however, it could fit this argument.

What is important to notice is that cultural mediation can happen inside art venues, but also outside of them. The role that cultural mediators play in museums is of extreme importance in dealing with audiences who have already arrived in the museum space. However, there are other cultural mediators outside the boundaries of those spaces who can work in favor of bringing audiences to museums and art spaces, and art journalists are amongst them. By writing and talking about exhibitions and art events inside those spaces in the news media, social media, or any other format of communication, they are playing the role of mediators outside the walls of art spaces.

This idea is upheld by the Brazilian professor and researcher of cultural mediation Cayo Honorato in the text "Mediação extrainstitucional". He calls "extra-institutional mediation" what happens internally to art spaces – education, interpretation, guided tours, etc – but also transversally – "which has a trajectory that goes in a zigzag from outside to inside the museum, and vice-versa, without making exclusive its context" (2015, 208,)[11]. For Honorato, when it comes to cultural mediation, there are no limits of space. He says it is impossible to stay alien to institutions, but the mobility in them and through them have no

[11] Author's translation

natural, logical, or real limits. What exists are "conventional boundaries, socially sanctioned, which allows us to question everything, the institution included, and our relation to it" (ibid., 212).

Honorato even argues that extra-institutional mediation is needed not only to give new meanings to cultural mediation and its different approaches, but also to enable the radical transformation of institutions: "After all, what availability would that be, on the side of the institutions, to favor mediations that are looking for changing the rules of the game in which the very own institutions sustain themselves?" (ibid., 209). In essence, Honorato argues that cultural mediation plays important political and social roles that need to also exist independently from institutions.

Florian Wiencek argues that the mediation happens in the space between the work and the audience, in a moment when each person creates meaning to the artwork.

> "And this interface for, this in-between needs to be provided and formed to the needs of the visitor, so that at best everybody who wants, no matter what personal background he or she brings to the table, could potentially have for him or her personally meaningful engagement with the item in question" (2018, 97).

In his PhD dissertation *Digital Mediation of Art and Culture*, he argues that cultural mediation also extends to technological intermediaries and agents, which play a fundamental role in contemporary mediation practices.

Digital media are additional forms of interpretation to the human and personal education: "Humans still also learn from humans. However their role changes with the technological availability of information at the fingertips of the users, the automated contextualization." (ibid., 347). He argues that digital and physical mediations are complimentary, and each method has its own strength:

> "Both, digital and analogue mediation and putting cultural data on display as well as opening it up for interaction are not about merely showing the artifacts, but about facilitating a conversation and engagement with the cultural items, changing the way people think, forming social connections, eliciting multiple meanings" (ibid., 347).

As a digital platform, Bigorna develops digital mediation by using journalism and plain language to write and talk about contemporary art. Having all this is view – contemporary

art, plain language, storytelling, journalism, and cultural mediation, let us finally analyze our example in the last chapter of this dissertation.

5. BIGORNA, A DIDACTIC PLATFORM FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

Bigorna is the Portuguese word for anvil, a tool made of a large block of steel with a flattened surface on top, used to forge and shape metals. The anvil has been around since ancient times, and although some of us have never seen a real one, most of us have probably seen the reference in Looney Tunes animations, with Bugs Bunny dropping anvils on Coyote's head. So why an anvil? Anvils help to bring malleability to things that are rigid, inelastic, and inflexible. Like art.

Art helps us to perceive reality with more flexibility, it makes us more sensible and less rigid. It gives us lenses to see the world through someone else's eyes. As Luhmann claims, the role of art in society lies in perception:

> "the imaginary world of art offers a position from which something else can be determined as reality. […]. Without such markings of difference the world would simply be the way it is. Only when a reality 'out there' is distinguished from fictional reality can one observe one side from the perspective of the other" (2000, 143).

Art is a tool through which one can experience the world. It makes us feel and understand things we otherwise would not. And what a powerful tool.

Approaching contemporary art with the use of plain language is effectively giving the audience the tools they need to get closer to the art world. Writing and talking about art in a simple way with the goal of demystifying contemporary art does not mean commenting on what is good or not, or on what the audience should like or not. It means giving people a set of tools they can use to forge opinions about an artwork, an artist, or an exhibition, based on arguments they encounter and taking into consideration their own references and background. Eva Sturm explains that mediation is not about making art didactically manageable and controllable and not about creating formally measurable knowledge that can be tested in a quiz. In contrary, mediation is about using the nature of producing and perceiving art as an "unpredictable process" (2004, 137), which opens up a space that enables engagement and learning with and about art and culture.

This type of mediation helps to build vocabulary and critical thinking. It is a tool against claims such as 'art is not for me' or 'a child could have done that'. It is also acknowledging that art is a field for perpetual questioning. To provide a toolbox for audiences is to

acknowledge that not knowing is fine and that even the most important art specialist sometimes does not understand what he/she sees. Giving tools to audiences means coming down off the pedestal of the hermetic art world and having open dialogue with anyone who wishes to come closer to this world. That is the reason why the platform we are finally going to analyze in this chapter is called Bigorna.

5.1 My kid could paint that!

Bigorna is a didactic platform for contemporary art founded by me in April 2018. The website www.bigornaart.com was launched to publish online content which answers questions about contemporary art, such as: "Why are art videos so long?"; "What is the difference between a biennial and an art fair?"; "What has this artist done right to receive so much attention?"; "What is the role of a curator?"; "Does art always have to be beautiful?" Such questions are the ones I, as a journalist, am trying to answer in all of the content published on Bigorna. Even if they are not in the title of the texts, such questions are the journalistic agenda of Bigorna, and the texts about exhibitions, venues, or facts related to contemporary art act as a hook to bring audiences into these discussions.

The platform is composed of an Instagram profile (@bigorna_art), a website (www.bigornaart.com), a Facebook account (@bigorna_art), a YouTube channel (@bigorna_art), and Twitter (@bigorna_art). We also give online classes and have an offline program of guided tours and talks. Live and open discussions with our audience provide space for questioning. Comments such as "My kid could have painted that!" commonly appear in these encounters and are catalysts for great discussions between the group. Every piece of content and action in Bigorna is aimed at demystifying contemporary art.

Bigorna is also composed by Sofia Saleme, an artist, my sibling, and the platform's art director, who has been closely following Bigorna since its inception and formally started to work on the platform in 2020. Together, we discuss the agenda and coverage of the week. Sofia is mainly responsible for the designs of the platform, including video editions and visuals. Her production is related to how our stories can be visually told. As the content on

Bigorna is entirely conceptualized and produced, the appearance of the platform is also created from scratch.

As the main example of this research, Bigorna is analyzed here to apply the literature review and theory presented in the four previous chapters of this dissertation to a practical example. The goal of studying Bigorna is also to have a critical approach – with the possible critical distance allowed - to my own practice as a journalist. First and foremost, this example will hopefully serve as an example for other journalists, writers, critics, students, bloggers, and art lovers who wish to write and talk about art in a simple way. My objective with this analysis is to bolster my research and hypothesis that journalism and plain language are mediation tools for contemporary art. It is important to say that Bigorna is one example of a project in which these premises are in its core. Nevertheless, writers can take such approaches to any of their productions in various media and supports.

This didactic approach to art is not measurable. How is it possible to know if a text or a video is fully understandable? If the viewer has learned something from it? Or if a given text has offered layers of understanding? Starting qualitative research with Bigorna's followers could be a methodology, although such followers are already biased and would reassure the role of Bigorna. Most importantly, measuring the "success rate" of Bigorna is not my aim with this research and would require a separate analysis of the platform's marketing efforts. For almost five years, it has been a platform for testing and experimentation in journalism, contemporary art, plain language, and mediation.

Because the starting point of Bigorna is the questions visitors in contemporary art venues might ask themselves, I also used them in the subheadings of this dissertation for you, the reader, to get acquainted with the concerns that help me maintain the platform. The idea is to show that such questions are commonly asked by anyone and that Bigorna can be a safe space for doubts. More than answering million-dollar questions, Bigorna acknowledges that open discussions are an integral part of art. The answers we give on Bigorna are not the right or the only ones. My point of view shared in texts and videos represents just one of thousands of different perspectives.

In her text "What's in it for me?", Lan Tuazon discusses the importance of addressing such questions in the classroom.

> "A primary concern facing teachers who want to integrate contemporary art in the classroom is how to answer the inevitable, and difficult, question, 'Why is this art?'. Intelligent is the student/viewer who asks this question, and it is a question that cannot be ignored. [...] Such a question is an expression of doubt, which can only be the appearance and act of a personal will and determination to produce and challenge meaning" (2011, 14).

"Why is this art?" is very commonly the first question which comes to mind when talking about contemporary art. Outside the classroom, it can be acknowledged and addressed by art writers who can open up the debate and use simple language to include anyone in the discussions about contemporary art.

As artist Grayson Perry argues:

> "The art world needs people to keep asking it questions, and thinking about those questions helps the enjoyment and understanding of art. I firmly believe that anyone is eligible to enjoy art or become an artist – any oik, any prole, any citizen who has a vision that they want to share. There is no social qualification, no quarter of society you need to belong to. With practice, with encouragement, with confidence, YOU can live a life in the arts" (2015, 6).

In her text "Why Mediate Art", Swedish curator, art writer and educator Maria Lind states:

> "More and more over the last decade, I have observed in emerging curators and students of curating a relatively limited interest in communicating about art beyond professional circles […]. And I will continue to pursue it, but while trying to keep more of an eye on how what we are doing might be communicated beyond the confirmed believers. On how mediation can create space for exchange with something "other" (2013, 106).

I subscribe to this idea: Bigorna is an attempt to communicate about art beyond professional circles.

Text and videos that make use of transparent and uncomplicated language are published regularly on the platform, with an aim to contextualize artworks, artists, art expressions, the dynamic of venues and markets, and specific concepts, among other subjects. Today, the website is comprised of more than one hundred texts and an uncountable number of videos and posts that talk about art in a simple way. Over the last few years, Bigorna has been a hands-on experiment: my goal is to produce written and oral content that is

completely understandable for the first-time reader and that is accessible, free, and in-depth.

It is crucial to highlight the fact that Bigorna is written and spoken in Portuguese. Plain language is therefore used in Portuguese to talk about contemporary art in view of the fact that there are no similar productions in Brazil, my home country, and Portugal, the country where I live. As discussed in previous chapters, how-to guides on writing about contemporary art do not exist in Portuguese, as they do in the English language. Some references in English were already presented in this dissertation. As previously stated, the present text is in English in order to broaden the spectrum of people who will be able to read it. As I advocate for language accessibility, this research will be later translated into Portuguese to reach out to different publics in different countries.

5.2 Can I touch it?

The idea to create Bigorna started in 2017, when I was working at Veja São Paulo, a weekly magazine that circulated in São Paulo alongside the most-read magazine in Brazil at that period, Veja. Still in circulation by the time of the development of the present research, Veja São Paulo focuses on facts, people, and culture in the city. From 2015, I held the position of art journalist, therefore I was responsible for writing all the articles about art both online and offline.

The crisis in print journalism was obviously part of our day-to-day struggle. Through the course of time, the weekly art section with reviews about ongoing exhibitions in São Paulo shrank dramatically. Four pages were already not enough for the number of exhibitions and art venues that I wanted to write about and recommend. Soon, the pages of the art section shrank to three and finally down to two.

Digital news was the only way to cover all the exhibitions I believe deserved press since there were no space limitations. “The question of how to do journalism in a networked digital environment has been especially important for large media companies, which often have material for various media platforms”, write Quandt and Singer (2009, 131). They continue, “journalists thus must learn to communicate effectively using a more multi-faceted vocabulary of media technologies than they did in the past” (ibid.).

In 2016, my efforts were also directed to weekly Facebook Lives, in which I could freely talk about exhibitions on view in São Paulo for approximately 15 minutes. An average of 17 000 people watched the videos. Real-time interactions on video, especially those on Facebook, were a hit during that period. I was inspired by celebrities, journalists, and other professionals around the world that would talk with their audiences while they were sharing comments online. For me, the turning point as an art journalist was when we opened Facebook Lives for questions of viewers. "I never know if I can touch artworks in an exhibition", commented one of them. "Is a gallery for me? I am not a collector, why would I visit one?", said another person. "For me all the performers are crazy! Why do they have to be naked all the time?", claimed a third viewer.

These prompted me to change my approach. More than talking about the quality of an exhibition, how many artists were showcased, or which artworks were outstanding, I started to explain and justify why should one visit a given exhibition or how a piece of work could change one's way of seeing things. I understood I had to take a few steps back: explaining what performance is before suggesting a performance festival. Telling how an art fair works before talking about its opening. As Williams argues in her book,

> "Unlike ancient objects, recent art does not beg a written explanation because its distant meaning has dimmed over time, but in order for viewers to tap into an artwork's conceptual or material entry points, and appreciate its contribution(s) to contemporary culture and thought" (2014, 25).

She explains that, in this scenario, an art writer "is a conduit, possessing specialist information that enables her to link unfamiliar artworks to a curious audience and pin down an artwork's potential meanings" (ibid).

Listening to the magazine's readers and followers from all over Brazil changed what I understood to be my purpose as a journalist: a mediator, or conduit as Williams puts it. I founded Bigorna to pursue this vocation and dedicate an entire platform to those audiences who I knew wanted to discuss contemporary art, learn, and create a vocabulary and repertoire around art.

> As Maria Lind explains in the text "Why Mediate Art?", mediation "is essentially about creating contact surfaces between works of art, curated projects, and people, about various forms and intensities of communicating about and around art. As a term, mediation seems to be open enough to allow for a wider variety of modes of

> approaching exchanges among art, institutions, and the outside world. In short, mediation appears to provide room for less didacticism, less schooling and persuasion, and more active engagement that does not have to be self-expressive or compensatory" (2013, 103).

I believe she is right: art mediation, which I believe Bigorna achieves, is not about about explaining movements, timelines and names – is a space for building layers of understanding around art in the outside world.

My years at Veja São Paulo taught me the most important values in journalism: fact-checking; veracity of facts; commitment to telling a true story; the notion that a piece of news is a version of the facts; impact; condensation; plain and clear writing, amongst other important lessons that guide Bigorna to develop quality journalism.

A very strong value of Bigorna is the fact that we always do on-site coverage. We have recorded series in important venues such as the Venice Biennale (Italy), São Paulo Biennial (Brazil), Documenta (Kassel, Germany), Berlin Biennale (Germany), and SP-Arte (São Paulo, Brasil), to name a few. A handful from those videos are available to view on Bigorna's Instagram, website, and YouTube.

This in-loco experience is then recorded in videos or later transformed into texts. Being present at the event is also an essential practice in journalism. The reporter investigates on-site to create his/her version of the facts and later pass it on to the audience. The emotions and feelings are also latent in this scenario. As explained by Quandt and Singer,

> "Growth of the Internet, along with advances both in broadband technology and user-friendly web production software, means more people have attained the tools to produce content with relative ease […]. Bloggers began reporting directly from places where events occurred; they also contributed to political debates, both as information sources and public voices" (2009, 138).

As Wahl-Jorgensen writes,

> "The era of digital journalism has contributed to a rapid transformation in the role of emotion across these contexts. At the most fundamental level, the new media ecology has brought the fundamental category of news audiences/consumers into question through the drastic expansion in opportunities for ordinary people to shape the news [...] the advent of social media has further amplified these trends by both opening up for the creation of affective news streams facilitated by the logic of connective actions" (2019).

First-hand experience is predominant on the Bigorna platform. Because of that, videos are recorded with emotion, spontaneity, and passion. Digital journalism and social media make it possible to not only create evolving content but also to engage audiences –viewers can go along with me for a remote visit throughout the exhibition.

As a journalist, I bring my point of view, my version of the fact, which I acknowledge to be biased and passionate, as a way to bring people closer to the subject I am covering. In the videos, audiences are always invited to visit the exhibition if they can, have their own experience and build their personal opinions about it. They are encouraged to ask questions, share opinions, and engage with us.

When discussing the future of journalism, Quandt and Singer argue for the need to integrate new formats and new voices to a far greater extent than is currently the case in the newsrooms. They believe that journalists in traditional newsrooms are "only beginning to realize the opportunities of this multimedia environment" (2009, 141) and that a new "digital native" generation of journalists who are fluent in the languages of multiple communication technologies "will need to apply their skills and knowledge in ways that can match the needs of particular stories and particular media platforms" (ibid.).

As mentioned in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, Bigorna's approach to journalism is very much related to literary journalism. In his PhD dissertation, Manuel João de Carvalho Coutinho highlights that

> "Literary journalism [...] admits its compassionate approach, not only in writing the news article but also in the way that it analyses and considers the addressed subjects [...]. This results in a different assessment of the news, acting in the reader with real emotion and thus establishing a connection with the article in hand" (2018, 101).

Series of videos are important examples of journalistic coverage, storytelling, and on-site content production. The videos recorded in Inhotim in September 2022, for instance, envisaged exploring and investigating the open-air museum in the city of Brumadinho, Minas Gerais, in Brazil. The ten-chapter series of videos built a story that invited viewers for a walk with us through ten different pavilions of the museum.

At Cildo Meireles' pavilion, for example, we explained the site-specific installation *Desvio para o Vermelho* (1967-1984), a highlight of Inhotim's collection, composed of three

rooms filled with red objects. We contextualized the artwork in three steps: color (the red alludes at the same time to passion and to violence); politics (Cildo created the artwork during the dictatorship period in Brazil); and physics (the redshift is a phenomenon in the frequency of light in which it tends to show itself as red). Viewers were invited to send us messages sharing their experiences with this work. As Bigorna is obviously not related to physics, explaining the phenomenon of the redshift was not our main goal, though we opened the discussion for followers who did know about physics to share their knowledge with us and other followers.

Figure 6 – *Desvio para o Vermelho* (1967-1984), by Cildo Meireles at Inhotim, Brazil (Photo by the author)

Another example of the Inhotim series is the video about Doug Aitken's *Sonic Pavilion* (2009). This work is comprised of a glass and steel building constructed around a hole of 202 meters deep, where a set of microphones are installed to capture the sounds of the earth. Transmitted in real-time, the sound occupies the round building created for this

purpose. In the video, I use this artwork as a hook to explain the term "land art", why a sound piece can be art, and how this piece challenges what we understand as conceptual art.

Figure 7 – Doug Aitken's *Sonic Pavilion* (2009) (Photo by this author)

In the publication *How to Write About Contemporary Art*, Williams acknowledges the role of independent and online blogging. In her view,

> "the most promising of the Internet independents have been a boom to artwriting. Somehow less self-conscious than when committing their words to paper, online art critics have invented an unprecedented format combining firsthand insider information, sophisticated contemporary-art knowledge, and intensely opinionated commentary" (2014, 41).

Readings and repertoire are essential for the first step of any article or video that we share on Bigorna. I start by reading books, articles, other interviews, or watching videos and films, to prepare myself for any new content that is going to be produced. It is important that we do not copy press releases or other texts: our objective is to be clear and didactic and producing texts and video content from scratch is important to achieve this purpose.

Journalistic interviews are part of Bigorna's day-to-day practice. I regularly interview art professionals – most commonly artists and curators – to better understand their practices and points of view, and to enrich my vocabulary around their work in order to pass it on to audiences in a mediation process. Interviews are also important to justify opinions, bring more layers of information, add curious behind-the-scenes facts and creative processes, highlight other versions of the same fact, and give voice to these professionals.

One example would be the interview I did with Brazilian Marcello Dantas, curator of the exhibition *Rapture* (2021) by Ai Weiwei, on view at Cordoaria Nacional in Lisbon. The interview was an important part of the research I was doing around Ai Weiwei's work to produce videos and texts and offer guided tours at the exhibition. Knowing the creative process of the curatorial work, the relationship between artist and curator, and understanding the curatorial narrative directly from the source are essential to enriching content, be it written or spoken. An outcome of this would be the fact that instead of taking two groups in guided visits to the exhibition, I ended up doing a total of ten visits with more than 60 people during the four months the exhibition was on view.

Instagram Lives are an excellent way to make these interviews public and bring the artist closer to our followers. It is very common to hear comments such as "I never got to know an artist". Resorting to Instagram Live for these interviews is as practical as it is a way to include audiences in discussions with artists. One example is the interview I did with Brazilian artist Jonathas de Andrade, who represented Brazil at Venice Biennale 2022. After visiting his pavilion in Venice, recording, and sharing videos on Bigorna with my point of view about the exhibition, I also scheduled an Instagram Live with the artist so that he could share his first-hand experience with hundreds of people. Apart from being an easy-going and easy-to-follow chat, which demystifies the making of such an important show, Instagram Lives can be recorded and saved as an archive. The videos can be watched anytime.

Another characteristic of Bigorna is that is rooted in genuine journalistic values is its commitment to present-day facts. As it was thoroughly discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, contemporary art talks about the world, not only about art. It brings new perspectives around issues we face in our day-to-day lives: social economic and political

issues; questions surrounding concepts such as the environment and sustainability; identity, migration, and geopolitics, among other big issues. “Looking at Art is an extension of looking at the world,” writes Esplund (2008, 44). But, to him, art is not a mirror of the world, it goes even further: “But the world of art is not a likeness of that world. Art is a world unto itself. We all use our eyes to identify and classify things around us.” (ibid.).

It is imperative for us to show how artists can provide us with lenses to see the world through their eyes. Bigorna takes these big issues as a hook to talk about art and bring people closer to art. “Art uses perceptions and, by doing so, seizes consciousness at the level of its own externalizing activity. The function of art would thus consist in integrating what is in principle incommunicable—namely, perception—into the communication network”, writes Luhmann (2000, 141).

Figure 8 – *The Boat* (2021), by Grada Kilomba (Photo: Rafael Marques/ NiT)

Let’s take decolonization as an example, a burning issue in the whole world today, and briefly discussed in the first and second chapters of this thesis. We can pinpoint content on Bigorna that directly relates to this issue, such as the content created during the performance *The Boat* (2021) by Grada Kilomba. The performance-installation was presented in front of MAAT – Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology in Lisbon, to discuss decolonial heritage and racial prejudice in Portugal. The installation was composed of 140 blocks of wood, which formed the silhouette of the bottom of a ship in reference to

the ships that carried millions of Africans who were enslaved by European empires. It was placed outside and in front of the Tejo River, one of the markers of where the maritime expansion of Portugal started. The installation was activated by Afro-descendant performances who danced and sang. They asked which kinds of stories are told, who tells them and how. On Bigorna, in addition to filming the performance, we explained how Grada Kilomba discusses decolonization with this powerful action, as well as how she touches a sore spot in present-day Portugal.

In some series, we take "vocabulary building" literally. We have developed two long series which praise for storytelling, and are composed of 26 videos that go through the entire alphabet. The subjects of the videos are closely analyzed and bolstered by in-depth research. Launched in April 2020, the series *Artists from A to Z* showcased the works of 26 outstanding international artists who, in our conception, are essential in the vocabulary of anyone interested in contemporary art. The videos are each approximately three minutes long and serve as an introduction to the topic with references, images, and the use of plain language. Followers were invited to watch one new video which referred to one new letter of the alphabet every two days to hopefully enrich their dictionary around contemporary art.

Another video series, *Contemporary Art from A to Z* was released in 2021. It was composed of 26 videos that went through a glossary of terms commonly employed in the art world: "A for Artivism"; "B for What does beauty mean"; "C for Conceptual Art"; "D for Decentralization"; and so on. The three-minute-long videos were presented by me after profound research and a selection of references for each one of the subjects. I aimed to demystify the jargon and vocabulary commonly used within the contemporary art world and gave concrete examples to bring these aspects closer to viewers.

I talk to the video as if I am trying to convince a friend that an artist or an artwork is relevant. In "L for Land Art", for instance, I did not bring to the table theories about the movement created in the 1960s in the United States. The three-minute-long video is not packed with information, with names of artists or an uncountable number of artworks. This kind of approach brings lots of information which would only be useful for someone who is already familiar with Land Art. On Bigorna, the goal is to create a short narrative in

which viewers are not overwhelmed with names, dates, and artists' portfolios. In this way, the viewer understands why Land Art was important and how it changed the relationship people have with art. Until then, art was made inside the controlled space of museums, and land art brought the uncontrolled character of nature to art production. The narrative is an easy-to-understand conversation aiming not to patronize the viewer but to offer a step-by-step construction of this story. At the end, viewers understand the importance of Land Art for the contemporary art world until today.

5.3 Performance what?!

Cultural mediation and storytelling are also present in Bigorna's guided tours and classes. Such encounters promote mostly on-site, live, and open discussions, which take part in the educational content produced by the platform. I gave many of the guided tours in Lisbon, the city I live, taking general audiences to visit exhibitions. I have also given tours in other countries such as during SP-Arte, the São Paulo art fair, and Venice Biennale, in 2022.

Taking the latter as an example, the guided tours happen as follows: the process starts with the mapping and selection of exhibitions in Venice. There are so many things to do and see, therefore this first step takes into consideration what is being covered and said in other outlets in the world, and then I select what I consider to be the most relevant exhibitions for me to visit by myself. My endeavor in Venice started three days before the group arrived, in May. I visited all exhibitions and venues I could and studied the paths between them since they are spread out in the city. I then thoroughly analyzed each one of the exhibitions, not only by reading press releases or online content about them, but also investigating the practice of the artists, their past and present, correlations, references, etc. "In the guide's communicative role, processes of selection, provision of information, interpretation and fabrication make sites and societies accessible and interesting for visitors", write Feldman and Skinner (2009, 3).

As soon as the group of six women arrived (they were Brazilian art lovers, not art professionals, who hired Bigorna for this purpose), the intense two-day guided tour kicked off. I selected the national pavilions, artists, and artworks in the main exhibition, and parallel exhibitions which we visited together. I had created a narrative, a story, that I told

throughout the two days, including topics such as why this or that can be contemporary art, what is site-specific, how the subjects the artists referenced in their work connect to the main curatorial narrative, how it is related with the world in which we live.

In their book, Cerasi and An write:

> "In an era when people are accustomed to exchanging views and participating through social media and digital platforms, creative activities and social interaction are fast becoming integral to cultural engagement. More interactivity – in essence, more conversation and fewer lectures – can allow for multiple readings, with many different voices contributing to a deeper and more personal engagement with the art. At museums, educators more and more often adopt an 'interpretive' approach (asking questions!) where learning, understanding and appreciating art starts with what people already know and build further meaning from there" (2017, 111).

In the case of the Venice Biennale, the topic I focused the group's attention on was how situating contemporary art in old buildings and monuments can bring new meaning to these sites. One of the most interesting aspects of the Venice Biennale is that contemporary art exhibitions are spread out in the city and occupy palaces like Palazzo Grimani and Palazzo Ducale. In 2022, the latter held the exhibition of German contemporary artist Anselm Kiefer, whose paintings explored how the story of Venice was told by those who had power and occupied places like the palace in which the works were installed. On our tour, I asked the group to sit on the floor amid his enormous paintings so that we could freely discuss history, contemporary art, narrative, sustainability, power, and war. Of course, we also talked about the creation process of Anselm Kiefer's paintings, and how this related to his own story and the concept of his work.

In these guided tours, the experience is important. The idea is not to limit the interpretation of the visitor, but to offer more layers of understanding, therefore the group always has some time to perceive the artwork/exhibition before I start sharing information about it. The mediation process is based not on closing interpretations, but on opening up as many opportunities as possible for questions and discussions between the individuals in the group.

In Mediation of Art and Culture", Director of Learning and Research at Tate, Anna Cutler explains that this mediation process is "the development of an understanding of art but also an understanding of the visual and spatial world around us through cultural (creative)

learning" (2009, 63). This includes in my opinion our contemporary media environment. Online and offline journalism as well as social media content are included in this thought. She also says that such discussions about art enhance the development of the personality by building own knowledge and own experiences "through language, looking and discussion" (ibid., 65), which will enable a person to form own opinions and not only rely on filtered information and ideas from others.

As young mothers, some of the visitors in the guided tour raised questions around how their children learn history at school today. Individual experiences are part of cultural mediation as explains Maria Lind: "Experience based guided tours and workshops where visitors are asked to share what they see and what they think and feel about what they see, to discover 'the creator' in themselves, are part and parcel of this" (2013, 104). One of them asked what the difference between modern art and contemporary art. Another brought to light the fact that Anselm Kiefer uses clothes, shoes, and objects in his works like Marcel Duchamp did, and questioned the significance of ready-made in art today.

Apart from the service I was offering the group, Bigorna was as well covering the Venice Biennale on social media. During the six days, I spent at the biennial, I posted hundreds of stories on Instagram, in addition to regularly posting videos covering main and parallel exhibitions, artworks, curatorial projects, sites, and installations in the city, among other subjects. The research I do plus the experience of being at the Venice Biennale are important for the videos to be clear, alive, energic, and passionate. Followers went through the Biennale with me in short videos which passed the atmosphere of the place and how I was experiencing it. After the trip was over, I continued with mediation and educational approaches to the Venice Biennale on Bigorna. Having experienced a great deal of what the 59th edition offered, I then prepared classes about it both online and offline.

The in-person class gathered fifteen people in Lisbon and lasted three hours. It was a trip to the most distinguished pavilions of the Venice Biennale and the outstanding artworks in the main exhibition. The online class gathered 60 students on two different days. Apart from showing what I selected to be the most relevant exhibitions, artists, and artworks in this Biennale, my focus was to explain the curatorial proposal of this year's edition and why this is relevant today, how it relates to the world in which we live, and how it

influences the art world. I also discussed the role of a Venice Biennale today, and how curator Cecilia Alemani created statements aligned to current issues like the visibility and inclusion of minorities; women writing their own stories and not being overshadowed by men; the Ukrainian war, and subjects of identity, ownership, and migration crisis; decolonial thinking and Afrofuturism; being in touch with our roots and ancestralism as ways to better understand our existence in the world; amongst other topics.

During one of our walks, we encountered a performance happening. Such ephemeral and uncommon events intrigued the group, who stopped to watch. Two performers were dancing with each other, and this triggered questions amongst the members of the group: why is this art? What are they trying to say with these movements? How does it connect with the exhibition surrounding it? I listened to their opinions and brought arguments and references that were important to explain performances as a contemporary art expression. The conversation was very rich and stimulating not only for them but for me as well.

As it was already mentioned, it is impossible to prove the success of these approaches other than the feedback from the public, which has been increasingly reassuring. Guided tours and talks have more and more students, whereas the number of followers on Instagram rises and online interaction and engagement grow. Still, Bigorna's approach has more to do with a personal mission and professional vocation than it has to do with a movement or a kind of journalism.

My experiences as an art lover started very early in life, and it did not take long until I realized I very frequently could not understand what the curatorial texts really meant. I was often confronted with complicated articles and press releases which did not facilitate my experiences in contemporary art exhibitions. As soon as I started to work as an intern in a cultural press office, the uneasiness I felt when reading contemporary art texts motivated me to exercise my understanding of contemporary art and the way I wanted to express it. At the same time, the more I dive into the contemporary art world, the more I understand myself and the world surrounding me. So why not take this as a personal and professional challenge? Bigorna is my attempt to contribute to an empathetic art writing in which plain language is used to bring people closer to the art world. It is an effort to present possibilities beyond the patronized art writing that reinforces the distance between

audiences and the art world. It is impossible to know how long Bigorna is will last. Nevertheless, my mission as a journalist has changed for good and Bigorna follows this direction. Hopefully, it will inspire other art writers to also the importance of their role in bring people closer to contemporary art.

CONCLUSION

At the present stage of this investigation, readers are hopefully mindful of what contemporary art might bring to our life experiences. As I wrote in the introduction, "By the end of this dissertation, you will be convinced contemporary art can change your life the way it has been changing mine." This is an ambitious, and even maybe a naïve, objective. However, as the research path aimed to show, contemporary art does intertwine with life, and, as Luhmann states, its role in society lies in the domain of perception (1984).

Throughout this research, I used simple language to defend the hypothesis that plain language can be used to write and talk about contemporary art. I apologize to scholars used to more formally written texts who may consider this dissertation to have unorthodox – and possibly non-academic – writing. Jargon, enigmatic vocabulary, and indecipherable sentences very often appear in texts – maybe in an attempt to reassure deepness, singularity, and relevance. However, they commonly cast doubts on readers. In this dissertation, I defend not only in its content but also in the text itself, that being simple is not the same as being simplistic.

As it has been thoroughly investigated in this dissertation, the issue of complicated language is evident in art discourse. When it comes to contemporary art, texts are very often incomprehensible. If one faces challenges to understanding a press release, a journalistic article, a critique, or a curatorial text, the impression is that contemporary art must also be complicated to understand. As mentioned in Chapter 2, "A common misconception about the inaccessibility of contemporary art can emerge because writers are always wrestling with clear expression – therefore, if art texts seem meaningless so too must be art" (Williams 2014, 9). The outcome is very often translated into the sentence "Art is not for me".

By indicating that one of the reasons that people seem to feel distant from contemporary art is because of the language used to refer to it, this dissertation evidenced a problem and pointed to resolutions. Over the last five chapters, I defended the hypothesis that the use of simple language and journalistic coverage are tools that can be used to mediate

contemporary art. Writers can help to mitigate the misconception that contemporary art is not for everyone, by writing and talking in a way anyone – or, at least, most people – can understand.

I believe that we need more people working in favour of the accessibility of art, and this dissertation shows writers this responsibility is in their hands, and within their reach.

This thesis also defended the point that there are several ways, and not only one way, to write and talk about contemporary art. Throughout the thesis, I discuss *International Art English*, acknowledged by the art world as the only "right" way to write about contemporary art. As noted in Chapter 2, to Rule and Levine "people all over the world have adopted this language because the distributive capacities of the Internet now allow them to believe — or to hope — that their writing will reach an international audience" (2013). I then propose an alternative path to the one I have encountered in art venues such as galleries, museums, and art centers my entire life. Inaccessible texts also circulate beyond the walls of art venues, in media such as journalistic articles, critiques, and press releases.

The language proposed in this research is primarily concerned with empathy, clarity, and accessibility aiming to appeal to a broader public and ultimately to show that contemporary art can be part of their vocabulary. Throughout this dissertation, I reinforced my research with theory to defend the idea that contemporary art talks about our reality and can help us to see the world through different lenses. It is a tool for conviviality, empathy, and understanding. As quoted in the first chapter,

> "By inviting us to contemplate and reflect on the world we live in and the issues we face, today's contemporary art possesses an acute social conscience. There are more artists working with social issues than ever before, responding to the ways our present is shifting. As the world moves forward, our opinions evolve and our outlooks change, so too does 'contemporary' art" (An and Cerasi 2017, 19).

Supported by a literature review – I take this opportunity to apologize to those who I could not include in the scope of this research – I also acknowledged that the deep-seated conception that contemporary art is restricted to some people is closely related to how we, art professionals, communicate about this universe with non-professionals, art lovers and laypeople. As stated in Chapter 3,

> "Art, even abstract and installation art, is representational in a way that makes it difficult to adequately embody and project understandings of a world in which the dominant threats and processes have become less palpable and more systematically abstract in their materiality. This makes writing about art, including writing by artists, increasingly important. Writing, including the entitling of an artwork, allows for abstract connections to be made that would otherwise remain ineffable" (James & Haylock in Patty & Haylock 2021, 51).

This investigation proposes that opening space for doubts, creating safe spaces for apparently frugal questions, and talking openly about perceptions and personal insights is also part of this cultural mediation. In different parts of the thesis, I also defended the idea that art writing and talking about art in an empathetic way works in favour of what art proposes: dialogue, malleability, and different layers of understanding,

According to Terry Wu:

> "Art can be a powerful way for us to gain a better understanding of human emotions and stories. It gives us a unique lens to look at artists' inner worlds. It trains our brains to slow down and think more rationally, instead of emotionally. It restores our capacity to connect with others. Art plays a unique role in re-establishing humanity in this technology-dominated world." (cited in Curry 2021, 56).

This research involved investigation in four interconnected fields: contemporary art; journalism; language; and mediation. Each one of these different fields is presented in a dedicated chapter with the goal of establishing dialogues between theories and creating correlations among these different fields.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I took as a starting point the artwork *The Fountain* (1917) by Marcel Duchamp, to contextualize what is known as the birth of conceptual art. Naturally, the core research field of this dissertation is contemporary art, which is a very broad concept, interpreted in different ways. It is in the DNA of contemporary art to question *what is art*. As cited in Chapter 1:

> "Contemporary art is no longer one kind of art, nor does it have a limited set of shared qualities somewhat distinct from those of the art of past periods in the history of art yet fundamentally continuous with them. It does not presume inevitable historical development; it has no expectation that present confusion will eventually cohere into a style representative of this historical moment. Such art is multiple, internally differentiating, category-shifting, shape-changing, unpredictable (that is, diverse)—like contemporaneity itself" (Smith 2011, 9).

Therefore, contemporary art is in a constant state of expansion and change. In the first chapter, I used Duchamp's urinal as an example to make it clear what I mean when I refer to contemporary art. I defended that when it comes to finding meaning in contemporary art, there is no master language to learn and reproduce, only tools that help to build vocabulary and repertoire. On that account, good content about contemporary art transmitted in a clear and empathic way can help anyone to improve their vocabulary around the subject. These layers of understanding are intrinsically connected to the background, knowledge, and experiences of each person. As explained in Chapter 1:

> "The process of art interpretation is an exercise in intelligence that requires only the most basic human critical faculties of observation, emotion, and speech. Art and its discourse can be a simple process of having students ascribe language to their senses, form meaning, and then collect proof to support their thinking." (Tuazon 2011, 12).

One of the reasons why contemporary art can be difficult to understand is the language that writers, critics, journalists, curators and others use to refer to it. Titled "Language in Art Writing", Chapter 2 of this dissertation focused on this issue: *if such difficult language builds barriers, why does the art world insist on using it?* This chapter analyzed the language used in the art world – commonly referred to as International Art English or Artspeak – as well as its relation to power. "The more overheated the market gets, the more overheated the language gets [...]. The more you can muddy the waters around the meaning of a work, the more you can keep the value high", writes Beckett (2013, page).

One of the main points in this chapter is that complicated language can help to differentiate the art world and the art market. Beckett defends that "However laughable the language may seem to outsiders, to art-world people, speaking or writing in IAE can be a potent signal of insider status" (ibid.). It helps to segregate art professionals from laypeople; it helps to elevate their status. This point is also upheld by Roy Harris, who writes that Artspeak is used as a means to "elaborate social rationale to justify their existence" (2003, 194).

Therefore, it is of great importance that those who write and talk about contemporary art understand that using plain language can help bring people closer to this world. In Chapter 3, "Plain Language to Talk about Contemporary Art", I investigated how clear,

uncomplicated, and simple language, be it written or spoken, can be used to bring contemporary art and audiences closer together.

I advocated for the idea that it is possible to talk and write about this subject in plain language in any language, not just in English. Although *International Art English* is a convention born in the English language in the 1970s, it is used in different languages and countries and shapes what is understood as standard practice in art writing. As noted in this chapter, "A decade later, much of the middlebrow *Artforum* sounded similar. Soon after, so did artists' statements, exhibition guides, grant proposals, and wall texts" (Rule & Levine 2013).

This also happens in Portuguese, my mother tongue, in countries such as Brazil and Portugal, where, respectively, I was born and where I live. This research was illustrated by the real world experience of my practice as an art journalist in both countries, and the nearly incompressible art texts I encountered both inside and outside of art venues themselves.

This idea leads us to Chapter 4, in which I defended the idea that journalists can help to mediate contemporary art outside of art venues. As good storytellers, journalists can write and talk about art in an empathetic, energic, and emotional way, bringing their audiences closer to the subject. Titled "Journalism as a Mediation Tool for Contemporary Art", this chapter presented the values of literary journalism, which advocates for the right of journalists to show emotions and express opinions, and therefore create bonds with their audiences. As a matter of course, they play an important role as middlemen between art and audiences. As cited in this chapter:

> "in order for arts journalism to play an important part in a democratization of arts and to become more accessible to the public, descriptive and analytic texts should take up more space than art critique. Since art productions are often open to interpretation, the vision of one single critique on a piece restricts the variety of meanings available to the public" (Morin, 2021).

I first became actively concerned with the role of art journalists as mediators more than five years ago when I decided to advocate for a journalism that uses plain language to talk about contemporary art in a simple way. I then created Bigorna, a digital platform — grounded in using plain language — comprised of texts, videos, guided tours, and classes.

In Chapter 5, I use Bigorna as a study to bring practical examples to this dissertation. As I defend that we need more people working in favor of making art more accessible, over the past few years I have done so myself. I hope Bigorna inspires art writers around the world to do so as well.

As mentioned in the last chapter, it is difficult to measure Bigorna's success rate of mediating contemporary art. While it isn't always possible to gather quantitative evidence, qualitative evidence proves Bigorna's worth. The positive feedback from readers and followers is reassuring and has been encouraging us to move forward. Since 2018, and especially over the past two years, followers spontaneously show appreciation for our work online and offline. Countless readers have thanked us for our texts. People on the streets come to congratulate us for our work in Bigorna. Teachers have come to us to say Bigorna is a reference in their classes. A high school art teacher in the South of Brazil wrote that she and her students use Bigorna as their first point of reference when they are talking about contemporary art in class: "They love it! We use not only the texts but also the videos, we share your coverage around the world between us, thank you for this profound and beautiful work." Compliments like this give me the strength to move forward.

It is crucial to observe that the platform might eventually end for different reasons. However, the hypothesis of this research – which also is what guides me through my professional experience – will still exist. Bigorna is only an example of how journalistic coverage and plain language can help to mediate contemporary art. Other projects with different shapes, products and content already exist in other parts of the world, and others can and must emerge in different contexts.

I cannot stress enough the fact that a handful of respected writers have been emphatic about the importance of plain writing to talk about contemporary art. A great number of them were referenced and quoted throughout this research, as they have been great inspirations for my work as an art journalist. Nevertheless, as far as I am concerned, there are no writers in the Portuguese language who have dedicated themselves to studying plain language and journalism to mediate contemporary art. This is what sets this thesis apart from other works done on this topic.

Hopefully, this thesis will generate more debates around the abstruseness of the contemporary art world concerning language, and other equally important subjects concerning other types of communication strategies, accessibility, representation, and financial access, which go beyond the scope of this research. As Vorstermans states:

> "The world is burning, open exchange and democracies are under threat, diversity and otherness are not being dealt with in a healthy way, many people no longer feel part of a wider community, solidarity is lacking. My strong belief is that the arts are able to bring in new imaginaries, which can lure people into looking differently, discussing, exchanging, and dealing with other and otherness" (in Patty & Haylock 2021, 245).

Art plays a role in people's perception of the world surrounding them, and therefore it also plays a role in the ways they live their own realities. I am optimistic that this dissertation will bring inspiration to other writers all over the world. The dream is that the feeling that is shared by many of "Art is not for me" would not be a reality anymore. A great utopia worth fighting for.

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