

## 1 Introduction

This Element investigates diachronic shifts in the way that contemporary artists in English-speaking contexts have used language to conceptualise their art practice from 1950 to 2019. It then compares these shifts to see whether they align with diachronic changes in the wider English lexicon. The aim is to establish whether there is some relationship between the shifts in everyday language use and the aesthetic and conceptual developments that take place over time in the art world. In carrying out these objectives, the Element also provides a case study for the use of corpus analysis to examine connections between the specialist languages that mediate the practices of professional, institutional or cultural communities and the more general language use of their wider contexts.

To achieve its aims, the Element first examines a 235,000-word diachronic corpus developed from artists' interviews and statements from 1950 until 2019. This is referred to as the Artists' Language Corpus (hereafter, ALC). The first stage of the study examines the ALC to identify significant trends that have occurred in the way that artists represented by the corpus have used language to conceptualise their creative practices. As an example, the Element will show that, in the early twentieth century, an artist's practice frequently involved what they conceptualised as an attempt to *solve a problem*, however, this creative motivation waned as the twentieth century progressed and other discursive constructions began to motivate creative practice, such as depicting the *essence of memory*. Indeed, following the discourse theories of Fairclough (1992), as well as Phillips and Hardy (2002), who, among others, view our social lives, identities and practices as being brought into play by language, rather than language being a simple reflection of that which already exists, this Element takes the view that the language used by artists to describe their work has an important constitutive function. That is, if at a particular point in time art practice is widely conceptualised through the language of *solving a problem*, then this discursive understanding of art will tend to motivate the type of work that is produced by artists at that particular time.

Given this understanding, it is also very likely that the specific language used by artists to conceptualise their practices tends to emerge from a wider social and historical context. As such, the second stage of this Element seeks to establish whether changes in the wider lexicon might exhibit a relationship with the changes that were found to occur over time in the ALC. To achieve this, the Element examines whether the findings from the first stage of the analysis statistically correlate with language shifts in the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), one of the largest available diachronic

corpora (Davis, 2010). Overall, the study draws on the corpus-analytical resources associated with Modern Diachronic Corpus Assisted Discourse Studies (Partington, 2010; Marchi, 2018), notably trend mapping and correlation, but it also involves tools, such as frequency, collocation and concordance analysis, often used for the corpus-based analysis of discourse (Baker, 2006).

Section 1.1 further establishes the belief underpinning this study that language is constitutive of creative practice and provides historical examples of the type of language used by artists to discursively conceptualise their creative practices. Section 1.2 provides a brief review of studies that examine the relationship between art and language, from Harris' (2003) historical study of artspeak in the western tradition, to Rule and Levine's (2012) critique of contemporary arts writing. Section 2 describes and justifies the methods, analytical procedures and statistical measures used throughout the Element. It also provides details about ALC, the specialised diachronic corpus developed for the Element. Section 3 uses corpus analytical tools to identify key diachronic trends found in the ALC. Findings are statistically supported and visualised using figures. Section 4 compares the trends identified in Section 3 with the diachronic reference corpus COHA, to evaluate whether shifts in the way visual artists have discursively conceptualised and legitimised their work throughout the past century align with those occurring in general language use. The section also further examines the occurrence in COHA of some of the lemmas identified as trending in the ALC in an attempt to account for their increasing or decreasing use by artists over time. Finally, Section 5 draws on the previous section to discuss the implications of the findings and consider whether artistic developments in contemporary art practice are in some way shaped by language shifts in the wider English lexicon.

### 1.1 The Role of Language in Contemporary Art Practice

The creative practices of contemporary visual artists can never be decontextualised from language. First, artists are constantly in dialogue with their peers, dealers, collectors, critics, audiences and acquaintances about their creative activities and these interactions continually impact on and shape the work that they produce. The prominent twentieth-century art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, for example, identified the constant 'friendly conversations' between Pablo Picasso and George Braque as crucial to the important advances that took place in early twentieth-century painting (Kahnweiler, 1949: 6). In another example, the letters of the influential New Zealand dealer Peter McLeavy show that he would regularly visit his artists' studios as a way of

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controlling the quality and direction of their work; a process that he explicitly states would take place through talk (Trevelyan, 2013).

Second, artists' particular conceptualisations of what artistic practice encompasses is always subject to wider macro discourses.<sup>1</sup> One way that these conceptualisations are constituted is through the published writings of influential individuals. A notable example is the Renaissance architect Alberti's 1485 treatise in which *beauty* was first proposed as the highest ideal of art; a concept that would go on to dominate European art practice for three centuries (Harris, 2003). A more recent example, and one influential to the practices of contemporary artists in the second half of the twentieth century, is Sol LeWitt's 1967 essay, which argued that the idea informing an artwork was more important than its physical form (LeWitt, 1967). Although he personally rejected his influence (Ostrow, 2003), LeWitt was reproducing prior discourses about the primacy of the idea in visual art by the seminal artist Marcel Duchamp. In a 1946 interview, for instance, Duchamp stated that 'I wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting. I was much more interested in recreating ideas in painting' (Sweeney, 1946).

The language found in the statements, manifestos, essays or interviews of artists throughout time can therefore provide useful information about the types of discourses that artists draw on to conceptualise and motivate their creative practices. For example, in the early modernist period, artists tended to discursively conceptualise their work as a *study* and were motivated by the notion of their practice being an educational pursuit. As a result, artists would employ the resources of their creative practice to carry out repeated detailed *studies* of a landscape, a bowl of fruit or the human figure to *learn* about its form and how to represent its unique essence. In his letters to Émile Bernard, for example, the French modernist Paul Cézanne states that 'the painter should devote himself completely to the study [l'étude] of nature, and try to produce paintings that will be an education [enseignement]' (Cezanne, 1904, cited in Danchev, 2013: 339). He conceptualised this process as a sustained personal endeavour due to its inherent complexity and believed that it transcended his predecessors' focus on technique, which he dismissed as 'formulas' (Cezanne, 1905, cited in Danchev, 2013: 353). An examination of the language used by Vincent Van Gogh in his letters indicates how he also discursively conceptualised his practice as a study. In an 1889 letter to his brother Theo, for example, he stated that: 'It's the *study*

<sup>1</sup> The use of the term 'discourses' here refers to the words, statements or ways of speaking that produce people's understanding of certain concepts, objects and practices (Fairclough, 1992). As will be discussed, an example is the way that some people (including some art critics) are influenced by certain historical discourses when they only perceive an artwork as legitimate if it exhibits what they refer to as 'artistic taste' or 'beauty'.

[l'étude] of the figure that *teaches* [apprendre] one to grasp the essential and simplify (Van Gogh 1889, cited in Jansen et al., 2009).

By the 1920s, contemporary artists began to conceptualise their work through the still ubiquitous nineteenth-century discourses of exploration and discovery (Hocking, 2018). These discourses, with their emphasis on the new and unknown, provided artists with an opportune vocabulary to facilitate the emergent creative processes that could represent the widespread industrial advances taking place in Europe at the time, as well as the novel experiences that these advances brought to everyday life. According to the art historian Efland (1990), this focus of art and design practice as exploration first appeared in the foundation programme of the innovative Bauhaus art school in Germany. As such, exploration discourses are repeatedly evident in both the texts produced by the Bauhaus and the subsequent descriptions of the Bauhaus programmes by its masters. For instance, in the Breviary for Bauhaus Members, Walter Gropius stated that the 'common creative source' of art and technology 'must be explored and rediscovered' (Gropius, 1924, cited in Stein 1980: 76), an allusion to an explorer's pursuit for the source of a river. Gropius later described the Bauhaus as 'preoccupied with exploring the territory' (Gropius 1965: 90) and Johannes Itten referring to Bauhaus assignments on colour and texture suggested that 'a whole new world was discovered' (Itten, 1964: 147). Art as exploration discourses are still widely pervasive today and artists frequently characterise their creative practices as explorations in unknown countries, as exciting adventures or as continuous journeys. Importantly, by the late 1950s, with the wider emergence of a focus on the conceptual, the discourses of exploration and ideas merged. The practices of artists were increasingly motivated by the conceptualisation of their work as the exploration of ideas, concepts, issues or possibilities, as can be seen in LeWitt's 1967 manifesto where he stated that 'if the artist wishes to explore his idea thoroughly, then arbitrary or chance decisions would be kept to a minimum' (LeWitt, 1967: 80).

Since the 1970s, the increasing inclusion of visual art as a university discipline, and the related requirement to validate the emergence of a new studio-based culture within the university context, has resulted in the reconceptualisation of creative practice as research that produces new knowledge (Elkins, 2009). Elkins points out that this emergent research discourse in the creative arts arises from the standardisation of university policies; that is, art departments like other departments 'must endeavour to add to knowledge through new research' (p. 112). He states that a wealth of literature accompanying the institutionalisation of the visual arts studio has over time naturalised the art as research discourse and in doing so has hidden its institutionally motivated origins. Consequently, contemporary visual artists

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now frequently refer to their art making as ‘research-based practice’ or simply ‘research’. In an interview, for instance, the artist-duo Gilbert and George described their artistic practice as ‘always *research*, always continuing, non-stop’ (The Talks, 2011: para. 38). Evident in this remark is the reproduction of the study discourse’s entailment of persistence, seen decades earlier in Cézanne’s conceptualisation of his practice as a ‘never-ending’ [incessant], life-long endeavour (Cezanne, 1904, cited in Danchev, 2013: 337). A more recent example of the research discourse is apparent in a comment by the contemporary artist Kameelah Janan Rasheed, who, in an interview in *Artforum*, stated that: ‘I’ve stopped seeing myself primarily as an artist. I’m more of a learner who is trying to make her research and inquiries visible through an ecosystem of different media or experiments’ (Halpert, 2019: para. 2). In this comment, Rasheed discursively reconceptualises her artistic practice as research, effectively a result of the experiments that she conducts. Furthermore, and again evoking the related study discourse, she also conceptualises herself as a learner.

To conclude this introductory section, two important points should be made. First, I would argue that the language of the discourses that conceptualise art over time becomes entrenched in the lexicon of contemporary artists as constitutive of the natural and therefore legitimate actions of art practice. For example, the action of ‘exploring’ some phenomenon through visual practice has gradually come to be understood as something that artists might legitimately do as art. At the same time, these discourses enable artists to rationalise their work to their audiences through the verbal texts they produce, in particular the artists’ interview or the artists’ statement. However, artists themselves are not always explicitly conscious of the discourses that motivate and ultimately legitimise their practices.

Second, the writings of Alberti or LeWitt, the thoughts of Duchamp, the values of Cézanne, or the beliefs underpinning art institutions – all of which have unquestionably informed subsequent creative practices – are themselves shaped by wider social discourses; discourses that, it could be argued, are often manifested in everyday language. For example, and referring specifically to the early twentieth-century conceptualisation of art as exploration, it is well documented that a ‘culture of exploration’ was prevalent throughout Europe in the late nineteenth century and that this became a central focus of literary, economic, religious, political, scientific and, notably, aesthetic life (e.g., Driver, 2001, 2004). The next section looks briefly at some of the published literature investigating the relationship between language and art practice, focussing in particular on the types of (often competing) discourses that shape the conceptualisation of artistic practice.

## 1.2 Literature Review

## 1.2.1 Roy Harris and Artspeak

Roy Harris' (2003) *The Necessity of Artspeak* provides one of the more comprehensive historical overviews of the role that language has played in the conceptualisation of art practice in the western tradition. His study begins by making the important point that given the evidence of myriad treatises and manuals of instruction produced by arts practitioners from the early Greek sculptors onwards, the arts in antiquity were fundamentally connected to literacy. That is, artistic knowledge, and the status it entailed, was not simply demonstrated through visual practice, but through the ability to theoretically explain the principles of artistic practice in writing. According to Harris, this connection between the verbal and the visual has had a profound effect on the western tradition of the arts; predominantly by giving precedent to theory over practice, but also by elevating the status of those arts that could be made verbally explicit over those which could be developed merely through tacit 'observation and imitation' (p. 23).

In light of this observation, Harris explains how certain discourses have shaped the conceptualisation of visual arts practice. A major example involves Plato's critique of poetry in *The Republic* (Book X), in which he defines oratory, painting and sculpture as simply nothing more than 'imitations' of nature. That is, Plato believed the objects produced by these arts were simply static illusions of the more complex reality that they were attempting to depict and that similarly the techniques exemplified in the written treatises and manuals of instruction were deficient representations of the writer's actual knowledge (see Harris, 2000). Plato's attack, however, is widely viewed as being motivated by his attempt to increase the status of his own discipline philosophy over poetry, the latter was, at the time, regarded as the most literate, and therefore most exalted, of the arts (see also Halliwell, 1988: 120). Nevertheless, the discursive relationship that Plato established between art and nature continued to have resonance throughout history. The philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 BC–65 AD), for example, claimed that 'all art is but imitation of nature' (Seneca, trans. 1925: 445) in his *Moral Letters to Lucilius* (AD 65), and the Roman educator and rhetorician Quintilian (AD 35–100) stated in his influential text, *Institutio Oratoria* (95AD), that 'in art no small portion of our task lies in imitation' (Quintilian, trans. 1939: 139).

Another important instance of language shaping changes in western visual arts practice, mentioned by Harris, involves the Renaissance architect Leon Battista Alberti. As mentioned earlier, Alberti believed that art should not only resemble nature but should also be beautiful. Alberti made this claim in his

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influential fifteenth-century treatise on architecture, *De Pictura* (1435), when he wrote that ‘let him not only prefer the resemblance of things but also, and above all, beauty itself’ (Alberti, trans. 2011: 78). He goes on to criticise a celebrated ancient painter, Demetrius, who he states, ‘did not reach the maximum level of praise, because he was more careful in expressing resemblance than beauty’ (p. 78). Harris (2003) argues that the conceptualisation of painting promoted by Alberti was ‘to dominate European thinking in the arts for three centuries’ (p. 46) and points out that even in 1929, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was continuing to state that ‘the function of art is the creation of beauty’ (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed., vol. 2, cited in Harris, 2003: 46).

Taking into account these and other historical examples, Harris states that ‘writing about it [art] is as influential culturally as producing actual works of art’. He refers to language about art as ‘artspeak’ and argues that ‘artspeak, far from passively reflecting the practice of artist, *begins to determine what practices shall be granted the status of arts*’ (Harris, 2003: 28 [emphasis added]).

### 1.2.2 Contemporary and Competing Discourses

The language used to conceptualise art practice and provide artists with a textual catalyst for their practice in the late twenty-first century is often viewed as informed by French structuralist and post-structuralist theory (e.g., Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida) which was introduced to artists in the late 1970s (Kester, 2011; Lejeune, Mignon and Pirenne, 2013). According to Lejeune et al., this occurred because a number of journals at the time began translating and interrogating French thought into English with an experimentation of form and tone that resonated with artists looking to justify or enhance their practices. The French theoretical foci on areas such as intertextuality, deconstruction, subjectivity and language itself also worked to shift artists’ work away from the types of traditional discourse of beauty, originality and artistic skill, as well as the materials and media that had previously dominated visual arts practice.

The emergence of these new discourses, however, often sits problematically alongside those of the past. Gillon’s (2017) study of the published commentaries on the Turner Prize – the preeminent contemporary British art award – provides some useful insights into the often competing discourses that pervade the conceptualisation of contemporary arts practice. As Gillon points out, many of those who critique the validity of artworks nominated for the Turner Prize have, through expressions such as ‘I could do that’ (Gillon 2017: 22), constructed the works as lacking what they believe is a required level of beauty or technical skill. Those who defend such works, which, as mentioned, often involve new artistic media such as film-based art and installation art, suggest

that although they fall outside the traditional disciplines they are nevertheless still ‘extremely well crafted’ (Gillon 2017: 23). Another defence seen in Gillon (2017) involves what I might refer to as a discourse of process, that is, the artwork lacking a perceived level of skill may instead be legitimised as the result of an intensive process of labour. The oppositional nature of contemporary art discourse is also evident in Roose, Roose and Daenekindt’s (2018) analysis of the topics discussed in 6,965 articles published between 1991 and 2015 in the leading art magazine *Frieze*. They suggest that two prominent art discourses are apparent throughout these years of the publication. The first focusses on formal and aesthetic concerns and is shaped by the more traditional concepts such as originality, beauty and authenticity, while the second focusses on societal concerns and is shaped by concepts appropriated from traditionally non-artistic areas such as politics, philosophy, history and economics.

### *1.2.3 Discourses of Art Practice in Education*

Competing discourses are also found in arts education. Banaji, Burn and Buckingham (2010), for example, using the term ‘rhetorics’, identify nine different discourses that shape education in the arts. These include the traditionalist creative genius rhetoric that views arts creativity as the special ability of certain highly educated or inspired individuals, an anti-elitist democratic and political rhetoric that focusses on creativity as the ‘everyday cultural and symbolic practices of all human beings’ (p. 69) and the economic imperative rhetoric whereby student creativity is linked to the creative industries and neoliberal economic programmes. Hocking (2018) has also examined the way that written and spoken communication facilitates creative practice in university arts education, showing that such communication is often shaped by a complex network of historically formed and intersecting discourses, including work, ideas, agency, motivation and identity. The discourse of work, for example, constructs creatively successful art practice in the studio as a habitual, routine-based and time-effective activity involving the ongoing production of multiple creative outputs. This discourse was seen as being reproduced in the studio tutors’ utterances such as ‘through the hard work the creativity comes out’ (p. 77), or in design briefs stating that students must ‘work quickly’ and develop a ‘good work habit’ (p. 71). It is also often linked to the discourse of process, as mentioned earlier.

### *1.2.4 The Influence of Language on Interpretations of Art*

The analysis of the way in which language is used to explain the work of art, predominantly through the genre of the explanatory text usually found



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alongside the artwork in an exhibition or online digitised collection, is a prominent focal area of research involving the relationship between language and visual arts practice. Blunden (2020), for instance, shows how the language of explanatory texts achieve their aim by first motivating the reader/viewer to focus on a particular feature of the artwork constructed as salient (i.e., *the white lilies*) and then adding to this feature further meanings that are not visible in the artwork (i.e., *symbolise purity and the annunciation*). She correctly claims that this type of relationship between the verbal and visual “‘adds something more’ to the looking’ (p. 55). In another example, Cunningham (2019) statistically examined a corpus of 180 online explanatory texts from the collections of a number of online museums and found that they could be clustered into five different groups based on their particular use of linguistic features, including those employing highly descriptive and informative language to construct the artwork as a product and those using expansive and interpretative language to construct the artwork as a process. Using a corpus containing 160 artists’ statements and the paintings to which they referred, which was created from four volumes of a prominent art magazine from 2002–3, Sullivan (2009) examined the different ways that representational and abstract artists conceptualise their work through metaphors of communication, such as *language*, *conversation*, *dialogue*, *translate* and *interpret*. In her corpus, for example, Sullivan noticed that *language* was used by eight representational artists and five abstract artists. She found that the representational artists used *language* to refer to either their methods or the inventory of objects (buildings, skyscrapers) used in their paintings, while for the abstract painters *language* consisted of sets of shapes and colours. Importantly, Sullivan found that representational artists viewed their work as metaphorically speaking to their audience, while abstract artists tended to enter into a metaphorical conversation with their materials.

Empirical studies have also investigated the impact of explanatory statements on the viewer’s reception of the artwork. Specht (2010), for example, found that those who read an explanatory statement before viewing a work were ultimately more positive about the work, especially if the work was representational, while Temme (1992) found that the enjoyment of looking at paintings increased for most museum visitors when they were accompanied by written information. However, in contrast to Specht, this only occurred when the paintings were considered ‘artistically ambiguous’ (p. 35). Another area of research into writing associated with the visual arts involves the genre of the artists’ statement. Hocking (2021), for example, analyses the rhetorical moves and related lexical features of the artists’ statement, Lise (2013) and Adamson and Goddard (2012) discuss the emergence, history and function of the artists’ statement, while Belshaw (2011) examines how artists use the

statement to shape their unique artistic identities. Finally, Garrett-Petts and Nash (2008) argue that the artists' statement plays an important generative role in the artists' practice. These studies all provide further support for the claim that writing about art is constitutive of artistic production and reception.

### 1.2.5 Critiques of Artspeak

As the language used to conceptualise art practice continues to evolve, those accustomed to prior, more established art discourses are often critical of the new ways that contemporary art is discursively framed. Kester (2011), for example, views the use of French theoretical texts as a catalyst for artistic work as superficial. He describes the practice as a 'liturgical relationship to theory', which he states involves a 'tendency to simply invoke theoretical precepts as axioms and then apply them to practice in an illustrative manner' (Kester 2011: 58). Similarly, Rule and Levine (2012) are critical of the reappropriation by artists of what they perceive as the abstruse language of the translated French texts. To examine this phenomenon further, they analysed a corpus of press announcements in the online arts magazine *e-flux* to establish the grammatical and lexical character of this type of theoretically inspired art writing. They found that it involves the overuse or misuse of a number of linguistic forms, including nominalisation, spatial and field metaphors, prefixes, adverbial phrases, lists, dependent clauses and definite articles, as well as lexical items such as *space*, *proposition*, *tension*, *interrogates*, *encodes*, *transforms*, *visuality* or *globality*. Their study has been highly influential and is frequently mentioned in the many websites produced to provide advice on the writing of the artists' statement.

While the studies mentioned above have either directly or indirectly considered the relationship between language and visual arts practice, including the observation of how certain emergent discourses affect change in the practices of artists, there has been no study to date that has specifically explored this relationship through an in-depth diachronic, corpus-based investigation of changing trends in the language used by artists to describe their own creative practices. Furthermore, no study has examined whether there is an alignment between shifts over time in the way that artists have described their artistic practices and changes that have taken place in everyday language use. Before moving on to the analysis of diachronic trends in the ALC, the following section describes and justifies the methods, analytical procedures and statistical measures used throughout this Element.