

Beyond Words: Labels and the Power of Shaping of Narratives

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Para além das palavras: rótulos e o poder de moldar narrativas

This scholarly investigation is situated in the intricate landscape surrounding the representation of information in many institutions in the art field, with a particular emphasis on the complex domain of labelling rules and procedures for what concerns the display of art pieces². The various changes labels have been subjected to in the last decades provide the study with a larger framework. Indeed, labels have experienced a remarkable metamorphosis: as apparently objective "matter-of-fact" data, they have been subject of a complex discussion in art historical terms, from both the perspective of academics and also of artists. Labels are no longer just tools for classifying, they are potentially prosthetic limbs of works of art, and they generate a space for interpretation, while, possibly also being an extension of the artists' positions. Particular attention has been given to their status: "The captions are, in the common imagination, a 'place' of certainties, scientific instruments par excellence, precise and definitive. And their function? Who should take care of the captions? What to include, what to omit? How often to renew them?" (Ciaccheri, M. C., Cimoli, A. C., & Moolhuijsen, N., 2020: 9). This shift of attention is not just a matter of a renewed perspective, but it involves labels' political power: the process is intertwined with a critical investigation into the ramifications of modern socio-museological issues. Who, after all, are artworks' labels intended for and who is, ultimately, in charge of writing them? How has the role of labels changed over time and what is the role of the artist? Can a history of labels also be written, and would it actually reflect major changes occurred in art, or would it be completely independent? Indeed, in today's world words for works of art are more than just descriptive terms; they play a crucial role in enabling deep analyses that go well beyond the inventory data. Labels have evolved into essential means of expressing complex and multi-layered stories, ranging from the detailed investigation of artefacts' provenance to the examination of the artist biography or declarations, or further they can contextualize the background of the piece. Power dynamics are extremely relevant to this matter. According to W. J. Mitchell "the label offers an expansive metaphor that stands for a

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2 The interest for the subject led me to focus my Ph.D. on the topic: Chiara Ianeselli, "The Untitled Title in XX century Art: Revolutionary Aspects and Implications," IMT Alti Studi Lucca, 2021.

whole horizon of thresholds between visibility, textuality, and power” (quoted by Welchman 1997: 332).

Labelling in Conceptual Art

The analysis of the progressive relevance given to this dimension clearly requires a wider context, however it is relevant to mention how significant awareness to this matter can be traced back to the Conceptual art in the 60s and 70s. Indeed, “the proposal inherent in Conceptual Art was to replace the object of spatial and perceptual experience by linguistic definition alone - the work as analytic proposition” (Benjamin H. D. Buchloh 1990: 107). Over the above mentioned decades various artists and art critics have reflected consistently on the definition of their works, and on titles, in relation to the institutions and the public.

Susan Sontag’s *Against Interpretation* addressed many issues regarding the fruition of a work of art, in a period characterized by “the odd vision by which something we have learned to call ‘form’ is separated off from something we have learned to call ‘content’” (Sontag 1964: 14). Sontag’s critique was part of a broader intellectual movement that sought to liberate art from the constraints of overreliance on interpretation, encouraging a direct and unmediated interaction between the viewer and the artwork. According to her “reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable” (Sontag 1966: 15).

The quite popular choice of using the title “Untitled”, reveals the artists’ refusal of providing spectators with a clear explanation or contextualization through the title. This tendency is counterbalanced by a growing textual dimension – in terms of artist declarations, interviews, publications, radio interviews, and so on. In the dynamic landscape of the 1960s, art criticism experienced a notable surge in significance, underscored by the active involvement of artists in academic and critical dialogues. In the U.S.A., prolific figures such as Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, and Mel Bochner notably contributed to this discourse, blurring the traditional boundaries between artist and critic.

Some of the artists felt “forced” to be more prolific in describing their works, as it happened in the case of renowned Donald Judd. He, indeed, has been asked many times to even provide the spectators with precise definitions of his works:

“BR [Barbara Rose]: You said that your work is not sculpture. If it isn’t sculpture, what is it?

DJ [Donald Judd]: I don’t know what it is, and I don’t feel that I have to give it a title. So I don’t feel required to say what it is” (Judd 2019: 149).

Also exemplar is the case of Sol Le Witt, who had to “counterbalance the general critical incompetence. He specifically objected the catchy labels used to describe their [minimalist] work” (Meyer 2001: 6). In her essay of 1965, titled *ABC Art*, Barbara Rose highlighted how the artists: “make their art as difficult, remote, aloof and indigestible as possible” and proceed towards the “elimination of the narrative element” (Rose 1965: 66). Also Kirk Varnedoe, in his publication *Pictures of nothing*, highlighted the desire of the artists to have no reference, and their realization “that abstraction is most successful and effective when association and meaning appear out of reach” (Varnedoe 2006: 31). If on one hand artists felt obliged to provide a written context to their work, on the other hand, they refused any kind of interpretation dynamics:

“Contemporary art at this moment asks to be left alone, does not want to be reduced to words or critical readings, does not want to intervene or offer a reading of the world, does not place itself in a moralistic key, does not accept being tamed according to a univocal vision and unisense, rejects interpretative encrustations” (Celant 1970: 29-30). Donald Judd, in his review of the show *Black, White and Gray*³ (January 9 – February 9, 1964, Wadsworth Athenaeum⁴), wrote:

Here isn't anything to look at. Rauschenberg said of one of his white paintings, 'If you don't take it seriously, there is nothing to take.' Morris' pieces exist after all, as meager as they are. Things that exist exist, and everything is on their side. They're here, which is pretty puzzling. Nothing can be said of things that don't exist. Things exist in the same way if that is all that is which may be because we considered feel that or because that is what the word means or both. Everything is equal, just existing, and the values and interests they have are only adventitious. (Judd 1964: 117).

Robert Morris's engagement with labels stands out as a prime example from the period. Although Morris' early works were rather suggestive – such as *Portals* (1961), *Passageway* (1961), and also very tautological, as in the case of *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* (1961) – most of his works are titled as “Untitled”. The choice of not giving a title was somehow counterbalanced by the multiplication of his writings, up to the point that he has been described as “the most subtle of Minimalist dialecticians” (Rosenberg as cited by Battcock 1995: 305). His position was rendered evident in many of his declarations:

I rejected from the beginning the market – and media – driven prescription that the visual should be promoted to a worshipful ontology while the wordless artist, a mute fabricator of consistent artefacts, was forbidden to set foot on theoretical and critical ground. But since language saturated one side of my work since the early 1960s, it is perhaps not surprising that the discursive found a more focused practice

The wall label disturbed my sleep. It raises the insomniac's cold sweat. This wall label begins to throb with ambiguous threat, refusing its repressed status as linguistic blurb. This institutional, tautological annoyance slithers and coils in the shadows. It begins to grow larger than the works proper in my dream galleries; a snarling, looming, hypnagogic presence.

[...]

Now I am awake, yet the label refuses to shrink. Here beneath the dim lamp its rectangularity seems to pulsate, its language groans and threatens. This blot of words screeches and sobs and finally recedes to a menacing tell-tale tick of mumbling under the floor boards.

Are you innocence, sincerity? Are you but a few simple guiding words, a soothing

3 This exhibition featured works of 22 artists, among which Dan Flavin, Agnes Martin, Robert Morris, Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly, Tony Smith, Frank Stella, and Ann Truitt, as well as the Pop artists Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Robert Indiana, Roy Lichtenstein, Jim Dine.

4 In this exhibition the renowned *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) by Rauschenberg was presented, described as the “most unusual work” (Berkman, 1964: No Page Number).

‘orientation’? Ah, but I catch your sneer, your twitching suspect words, your double meanings, your dominating strategies disguised beneath your platitudes. You wish to triumph once again (endlessly and forever) over the imagistic. Your agendas are always hidden.

In the light you seem so small there on the wall and straightforward in your brief rectangularity and nearly prim in your crisp paragraphs. You wish to appear luminous with the innocence of your cogent facts.

You are the paragon of gentleness as you tell them what to think. You proto and pre-critical patch of writing. You totalitarian text of totalizing. You linguistic grenade. You footnoteless, illustration less, iconoclastic epitome of generic advertizing. You babbling triumph of the information byte. You, labelless label, starched and washed and swinging that swift and fatal club of "education" to the head. (Morris 1993: 62-64).

The engagement of Robert Morris with labels and communication strategies challenged institutional norms and arose the interest of the following artists generations. Conceptual art has proven instrumental in furnishing a variety of critical tools aimed at dissecting and questioning institutional representation. Robert Morris, in particular, has been a pivotal figure whose work has acted as a catalyst for reexamining the power dynamics inherent in institutional frameworks and for inspiring artists and critics alike to engage in a programmatic analysis of these structures.

Labelling in the work of Fred Wilson

Some of Fred Wilson's works, who studied with Robert Morris at Hunter College, constitute precious milestones for the relevance given to the power of labels in terms of tools for potentially raising awareness. Conceptual art, indeed, had opened the way for many issues that Wilson was preoccupied with (Buskirk, M., Levine, S., Lawler, L., & Wilson, F. 1994). His interest in the devices that are used by museums are particularly evident in his practices of the late 80s and 90s:

"I had always paid attention to various museum practices: the way objects were displayed, what curators said about the art and artists in wall labels" (Wilson 2001: 33).

In 1990 on the occasion of *The Other Museum*, presented at White Columns, Wilson displayed the work *Spoils*: six masks coming from Africa were blindfolded (with the flags of their French and British colonizers) and labelled "hostages to the museum stolen from the Zonga tribe" (Wilson as quoted by Corrin, Lisa G. 1993: 304). On one of them Wilson projected moving lips (actress Alva Rogers) synchronized to a voice, which said: "Don't just look at me, listen to me. Don't just own me, understand me. Don't just talk about me, talk to me. I am still alive".

His deliberate focus was on the tendency of museums to numb or aesthetize the latent issues intertwined with the acquisition history, possession, and exhibition of specific objects. In this critical exploration, Wilson sought to shed light on and to question the ethical quandaries and historical intricacies associated with the artifacts housed within museum collections. Through his strategic use of labels, Wilson not only highlighted the potential challenges, but prompted a re-evaluation of the sanitized narratives often presented by institutions.

His seminal intervention at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992 (*Mining the Museum*,

from April 4, 1992 to February 28, 1993), now known as the Maryland Center for History and Culture, is particularly relevant. Here he used traditional exhibition tools to confront the collection and the way it is presented. The staff of the center, which was working towards a major representation of cultural diversity⁵, offered Wilson the possibility to use all the curatorial tools, from the selection and arrangements of works, to wall colouring, audio recordings and especially labels. His “goal was both serious and, at the time, unusual: to explore the ways in which the conventions and hierarchies of the museum consciously or unconsciously perpetuate prejudice” (Berger 2001: 8). Wilson upended the museum's traditionally white, upper-class narrative by juxtaposing rich pieces from the MHS collection, such as silver repoussé vases and sophisticated 19th-century armchairs, with brutal symbols of oppression, like as slave chains and a whipping post. He redirected attention to the overlooked local histories of Black and Native American communities through the strategic use of texts, spotlights, recordings, and objects typically relegated to storage, effectively dismantling the conventional museological narrative as a limited ideological construct. Through a text which was presented in the elevator Wilson posed many questions which definitely had the function to alert the visitor:

What is it?
 Where is it? Why?
 What is it saying?
 How is it used?
 For whom was it created?
 For whom does it exist?
 Who is represented?
 How are they represented?
 Who is doing the telling? The hearing?
 What do you see?
 What do you hear?
 What can you touch?
 What do you feel?
 What do you think?
 Where are you?

The sentence “Who is doing the telling” is particularly meaningful also for what concerns the voice of the author of the labels. In additional interventions, Wilson strategically employed the use of labelling tools in conjunction with the artworks on display. In particular, the work titled *Country Life of a Baltimore Family* (circa 1850) by Ernst Fisher painting, was given by Wilson a new title/label, namely: “Frederick Serving Fruit”. With the addition of a new label Wilson completely switched the focus of attention of the work on the person of the enslaved African-American boy. Moreover, by inserting his own name (Fred, Frederic), Wilson stepped inside the work of art – creating an alternative narrative in which he enacts himself as serving fruits, inviting viewers to reflect on his Afro-american background and position. In that sense, he also

5 Literally “an audience that reflected the cultural diversity of the community” (Corrin, Lisa G. 1994: 10).

invited the audience to an active participation to the painting's critical reading.

The artists employed in other works technological devices to generate interactive labels. Associated to a painting by Justus Engelhardt Kuhn, depicting Henry Darnall III (c. 1710) with his possession, among which a slave chained with a metal collar around his neck, Wilson introduced a voice that asks, "Am I your brother? Am I your friend? Am I your pet?" giving a possible voice to the nameless slave. This "literal conceptual ventriloquism" (González 2001: 28) becomes a tool often used by Wilson, thus enabling the continuous expansion of layered perspectives within the context of his installations.

Wilson's work with labels is also evident in "Metalwork 1793-1880", in which items on display included a case filled with repoussé silverware cups, ewers and an urn, alongside a pair of metal slave shackles. In this work, he combined the description of two items in a single label. The label reads: "the visual contrast of fine silver craftsman-ship and crude ironwork, as well as the position of the abject slave shackles amid the tall goblets and elegant decanters, functions as an allegory of class relations". Through this simple juxtaposition of two items in the same label, Wilson calls attention to the ideological function of an institution that has traditionally kept such objects apart (González 2001: 27). In this exhibition and in other projects, Wilson underscored the imperative to acknowledge the multiplicity of histories inherent in artworks and their presentation:

Museums often privilege one particular meaning over another, usually over all others. Museums ignore and often deny the other meanings. In my experience it is because if alternate meaning is not the subject of the exhibition or the focus of the museum, it is considered unimportant by the museum, or the museum is simply unaware that there is another meaning, or is too afraid a particular meaning. (Wilson 2007: 214)

He delineates his role as an artist to "bring out the meanings that I see in the objects, often the ones that, for one reason or another, are hidden in plain sight. This is not to replace the museum's view of the object's meaning with my own, but to let both meanings or multiple meanings be present at the same time" (Wilson 2007: 214). Wilson underscored the significance for museums to recognize varied narratives and to maintain transparency regarding the nature of the stories they communicate and the manner in which these narratives are presented within their institutions. This innovative approach challenged conventional museum practices, highlighting artists' potentials to encourage a more open and inclusive exploration of artistic narratives.

Concluding thoughts

Situated within the context of the burgeoning institutional critique movement, alongside notable figures such as Marcel Broodthaers, Michael Asher, Andrea Fraser, and Louise Lawler, Wilson's contributions sparked a significant discourse regarding the voices that museums choose to amplify and who is entrusted with the role of the "ventriloquist". This dynamic dialogue challenged established norms, prompting a critical examination of the power dynamics inherent in museum narratives and questioning the selection of voices that shape and represent the institution's discourse. In particular, his role as an artist allows, according to himself, for a

major freedom, compared to the one of the curator, forced to deal with the “so-called objective scholarship, which tends to make the viewers passive in their experience of the exhibition” (Buskirk, M., Levine, S., Lawler, L., & Wilson, F. 1994: 109)

The significance of labels, as highlighted in the introduction, has gained notable relevance across various types of museums, in particular within the context of the ethnographic museums. This heightened significance is a response to the growing institutional awareness, increased sensitivity toward postcolonial discourse, and a surge in research focusing on the collection and acquisition history within these museum spaces. As institutions strive for greater inclusivity and historical accuracy, the power vested in labels plays a pivotal role in shaping narratives and fostering a more nuanced understanding of cultural artifacts within a larger context. Since the year 2020, the Dresden State Art Collections (SKD) have undertaken a substantial initiative to enhance the accuracy and rectify problematic content associated with their art collection. This comprehensive effort resulted in the modification of 143 titles⁶ of various works of art within the collection. The changes were implemented to ensure a more precise representation of information and to address content-related concerns, reflecting the institution's commitment to maintaining transparency, historical accuracy, and cultural sensitivity in their presentation of artworks. The project, titled Revision of works' titles (“Aktualisierung von Werktiteln”), included the addition of tools to target a possibly discriminatory language: “Specifically, this involves the use of asterisks to conceal discriminatory terms. Terms marked with asterisks are not deleted but are only displayed after consciously overcoming the asterisk barrier”⁷. The press release⁸ further specifies the goal of the project: “With certain linguistic updates, the aim is also to prevent encountering terms that may devalue or discriminate against individuals based on their origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, or physical disposition”⁹. This project has provided a valuable arena for a critical exploration of collections, and it can also be envisioned as a potential extension of initiatives influenced by key figures, notably Fred Wilson. The trajectory of the project's future development remains a subject for evaluation and consideration.

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6 The project is still developing, so the number might be altered in the near future. Information available on 16.12.2023.

7 <https://www.skd.museum/besucherservice/presse/2021/zur-sprachlichen-ueberarbeitung-von-kunstwerken-in-den-staatlichen-kunstsammlungen-dresden/>, access on 16.12.2023, translated by the author. Unfortunately no precise criteria or guidelines structuring the project has been released yet.

8 Unfortunately the text is just available in German.

9 Ibidem.

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