

Art 1

Name _____

Modern to Contemporary Art

Due Date _____

You earned _____ out of 25 possible points.

Methodology Matrix 3

Using Semiotics and Psychoanalysis as Methodologies

Read Anne Wagner’s “According to What” and the excerpt from Art Theory for Beginners.

• Semiotics as a method begins with structuralism, which is a philosophical approach that analyzes society by looking at cultural phenomena, particularly signs, that have hidden underlying meanings that can be decoded. Semiotics is the study of signs, and why they mean what they mean. It relates to an iconographic approach, but differs in that it goes beyond identifying symbols and understanding their meaning in context and considers socio-cultural context. When using a semiotic approach, the viewer of a work deconstructs the meaning of signs within written language, speech, sounds, gestures, objects, etc.

Define semiotics - _____

What is a “sign?” _____

What equation is used to describe how semiotics functions?

Compare and contrast Jasper John’s Flag with Robert Frank’s Fourth of July. What thoughts do these works convey about America and its symbol, the flag? In other words, is the flag and what it represents being questioned here? Why or why not?

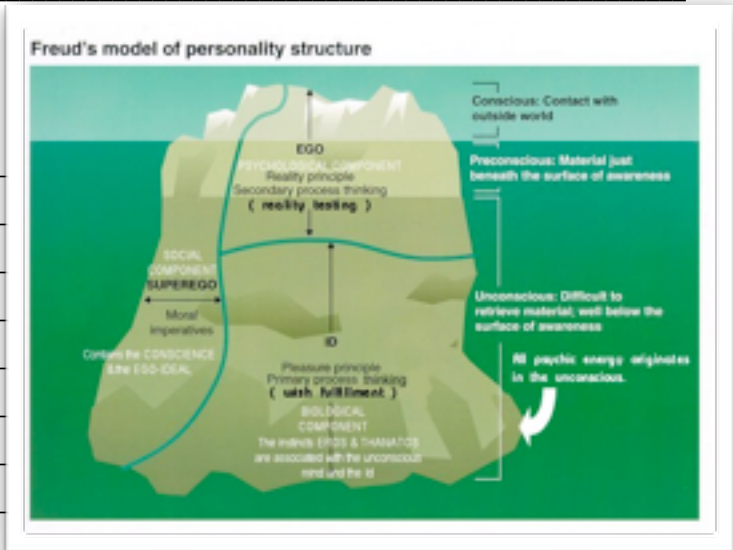
Why turn the American flag into a painting/ photograph? Why turn a painting/ photograph into an American flag? In other words, can something be a sign and the thing itself simultaneously?



A psychoanalytic approach uses Freudian theory on the development of personality (the iceberg, and the id, ego, & superego) while considering how the artist's decisions may have been influenced by drives outside of their awareness. Freud theorized that an artist makes a work of art as an attempt to resolve developmental conflicts and as a means of obtaining pleasure. Thus, when using psychoanalysis to understand the meaning of a work of art, the viewer examines an artist's psychological development as it relates to the work and the perceived (or demonstrated) pleasure associated with it. As well, the viewer may also consider their own experiences and how they color their understanding of the work of art.

Define psychoanalysis - _____

Icebergs are often used as metaphors to describe psychoanalytic theory. Explain the diagram.



Jasper Johns said of his work, "I didn't want my work to be an exposure of my feelings. Abstract Expressionism was so lively – personal identity and painting were more or less the same ... But I found I couldn't do anything that would be identical with my feelings. So I worked in such a way that I could say that it's not me." Do you feel that Johns' work is non-introspective and impersonal? Explain your position using a psychoanalytic approach.

Consider how life experience and personal struggles may have influenced Johns' work.

SEMIOTICS AND STRUCTURALISM

A Swiss linguist, Ferdinand Saussure 1857–1913, who gave some fairly obscure lectures in the early 1900s, has been a powerful influence on theory and philosophy in the 20th century, mainly because he produced what became known as **Semiotics**, which was a precursor to **Structuralism**.

Saussure published virtually nothing in his lifetime, but his students wrote up and published his lectures during the 1920s, and from then on his influence just grew and grew.

Saussure was interested in the *structure* of language, and how a language worked as a system, as opposed to thinking about how a language historically developed. This led him to some interesting conclusions:

Everything is a sign.
Language is a system of signs.



Ferdinand Saussure

The reason that Saussure's work became of interest to theorists, was because he was really concerned with how things came to function as *signs*. That means as representations of other things. Put at its simplest he was interested in the question of representation, of how one thing *stands for* something else. Saussure drew attention to the fact that words didn't have a natural meaning, the word cow doesn't refer to the "essence of cowness," but to an idea about cows.

Therefore a word is a sign:



WHAT IS A SIGN?

According to the American philosopher C.S. Peirce 1839–1914, a sign such as a smoke signal really acts semiotically. Smoke can be a sign that represents or stands for something else—it is smoke but it is also a message. All signs refer to other things, which is how they represent, an idea or an emotion.

Pierce thought signs operated in one of three ways:

- 1 Iconically—such as a picture that resembles what it signifies.
- 2 Symbolically—such as words that stand for what they signify.
- 3 Indexically—such as a footprint that is a trace of what it signifies.



Saussure pointed out that a sign was made up of two parts:

- 1 The signifier, which is the image, mark or word.
- 2 The signified, the thing to which it refers, the concept, object or emotion.

Saussure then argued that the relationship between the two is arbitrary, in other words not fixed and natural.

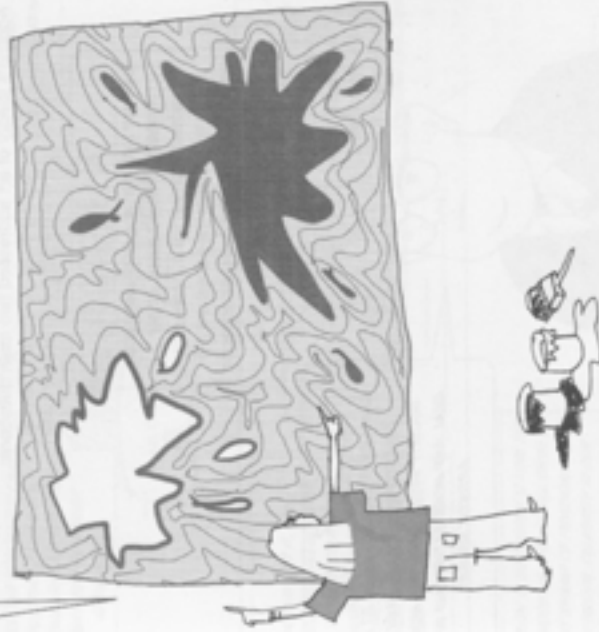


So, the signifier means something because we have a complicit agreement about what it refers to. We have a meaning system that we all understand.

ART AND SEMIOTICS

Saussure said that the structure or context fixes the meaning. So you could say a Semiotic theory of art is something like this:

THIS WHITE BIT HERE SIGNIFIES ACD.
THIS BLACK BIT SIGNIFIES THE BEAVIS AND
ALL THE HAIRY LINES ARE THE ATOMS OF
THE UNIVERSE ORIENTED TOWARD
THE BATTLE BETWEEN THEM...



Or maybe not...

Applying semiotics to art is a useful exercise because it helps us to think about how color, line, image and concept produce a language, or a grammar of artistic meaning, that is the art object.

Then the question "how does the art object function?" is answered by deconstructing it and by analyzing it semiotically.