

# The communicability of art and the problem of private language in public narrative space

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**Abstract.** This paper examines how private artistic language intervenes in public narrative space, focusing on the problem of communicability faced by private artistic experience in processes of public expression and understanding. By introducing the philosophical problem of private language, it argues that private experience inevitably undergoes loss, distortion, and interpretive uncertainty when translated into public forms. Drawing on Wittgenstein's rejection of private language and Kant's theories of aesthetic ideas, genius, and taste, the paper reveals a structural tension between private experience and public comprehension. It further engages with John Dewey's notion of art as evocative communication, addressing both its potential for facilitating communication and its limitations in relation to abstract ideas. Through experimental studies on textual annotation, the paper demonstrates that text is not a neutral medium but can shape and constrain interpretation. Finally, it argues that public narrative space, while enabling artistic exchange, may also intensify the challenges posed by private language, leaving private artistic language in a persistently unresolved and tension-filled condition within public narrative space.

**Keywords:** private language, communication, aesthetics, public narrative space

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## 1. Introduction

When people engage with a work of art, what is it that they are actually appreciating? Are they truly able to grasp the artist's creative purpose or intention, or are they instead only capable of developing their own creative interpretations? "Creative interpretation" does not refer to a simple misreading or a purely subjective association. Rather, it describes a process in which the viewer, when unable to directly and conclusively grasp the artist's original intention, reconstructs the meaning of the work on the basis of their own experience, cognitive framework, and the context in which the work is encountered. This question has always lingered within practices of art appreciation and artistic communication, and it constitutes an unavoidable premise for any attempt to understand artistic meaning. Whether art can effectively carry the artistic ideas and experiences behind it, and whether it can achieve genuine transmission and communication, has long remained a central concern in art theory and aesthetics. Against the backdrop of contemporary art's continual expansion of its media and narrative strategies, this issue has become increasingly complex and resistant to definitive answers.

This problem is also closely aligned with the philosophical question of private language. Some scholars have sought to introduce discussions of private language into art theory in order to account for the structural

difficulties that private experience encounters in processes of public understanding.

In the Critique of the Power of Judgment, Kant points out that artworks presuppose a purposive mode of judgment, yet aesthetic judgment cannot rely entirely on determinate concepts: "If an object is regarded as a product of art and is to be declared beautiful, then a concept must first be presupposed as the ground of judgment" [1]. Determinate concept refers to a purposive concept concerning what the work is and for what it was made, that is, the prior judgment through which an object is understood as an intentionally produced artwork.

This tension points to a fracture in artistic meaning situated between private experience and public understanding. The paper revisits the challenge that private language theory poses to the communicability of art, and further argues that contemporary public narrative spaces, now increasingly tasked with functions of artistic display and exchange may, while offering conditions for understanding, simultaneously obscure and intensify the doubts that private language raises about artistic communication. In the sections that follow, the paper will first outline how Wittgenstein and Kant introduce and contest the problem of private language within philosophy and art theory; it will then examine the different responses offered by Kant and Dewey regarding the communicability of art; and finally, it will discuss how public narrative space and textual contexts shape the presentation and interpretation of private artistic language in contemporary art.

## 2. Private language and art

Within the context of contemporary art, there exists a question that is frequently overlooked in practice: how can private experience enter a public narrative space and become communicable at all? The following section will examine this issue from multiple angles, unpacking the definition of private language, exploring the relationship between private language and art, identifying the reasons for its emergence and the difficulties it entails, and, finally, addressing why it is necessary to discuss private language in relation to art.

Put in the simplest terms, a private language refers to a form of language used by an individual that is unable to genuinely fulfill the function of communication, that is, it cannot truly convey certain experiences or thoughts that the individual intends to express. These may include sensations or emotions, as well as rational ideas and structures of thought. In Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein introduces and systematically dismantles the concept of "private language". He begins by posing a fundamental question: "Is it possible for there to be a language whose words refer to what only the speaker can know, and which therefore cannot be understood by anyone else [2]?" From this, it becomes clear that the problem of private language lies in questioning whether language can ever adequately transmit what the speaker intends to designate through it, that is, whether what is referred to by language, be it experience, emotion, or specific objects and theoretical constructs, can in fact be genuinely grasped by anyone other than the speaker. For this reason, the dilemma of private language is ultimately a doubt about the very possibility of genuine communication: it calls into question whether a person can truly convey what they think in acts of communication. In the process of transmission, there is no guarantee that the receiver can fully receive or comprehend the intended meaning being conveyed.

Within the context of art, a similar difficulty seems to emerge. Both art and language operate as modes of communication and expression that are grounded in the subject's private experiences, thoughts, and ideas. When artists gather lived experience or rational concepts, the question of how to translate these into artistic form becomes an unavoidable problem. If we accept the challenge that private language theory poses to the possibility of communication, then the communicative function of art is likewise called into question.

When artists attempt to transmit such private information through artworks, the information inevitably undergoes loss and distortion in the processes of linguistic and artistic transformation. In order to meet the conditions of communicability, meaning must be expressed selectively and in a limited form. As a result, when these ideas and experiences are incorporated into artworks, a portion of experience and theory that cannot be transmitted is necessarily sacrificed.

The existence of private language, and of a specifically artistic private language, has itself been the subject of considerable debate, and Wittgenstein's position can be inferred from his own arguments. Although he brings the concept of private language into philosophical discussion, he immediately rejects its possibility, or rather, denies that there is such a thing as private language. His reasoning is that language and concepts do not arise independently of a public context. The meaning of a word lies in the way it is used. Linguistic meaning does not originate from the speaker's subjective act of reference, but is grounded in shared forms of life, emerging from collectively held social awareness and experience. As he states: "If everyone had something that he called 'pain' which only he himself could know, then the word 'pain' would be without meaning" [3]. Meaning, therefore, does not stem from subjective and private sensation itself, but from its mode of use within a public form of life.

However, in contrast to Wittgenstein, there are philosophical positions that are more inclined to support the theory of private language. Aviv Reiter examines how Kant's theoretical construction may offer a philosophical grounding for private language. What is most central here is Kant's analysis of genius in the Critique of the Power of Judgment, and the private-language implications that may arise from it. She points out that three elements proposed by Kant potentially intersect with the problem of private language [4]. Kant highlights three components in the process of artistic production: genius, spirit, and taste. Genius is understood as a natural endowment that enables the discernment and development of rational ideas and creative intentions. Then, spirit refers to the expressive means through which these ideas are transformed into artistic form; and taste is a capacity for aesthetic judgment that also grants communicability. Finally, taste functions both as a standard of evaluation and as a cultivated ability acquired through training [5].

Although Kant does not explicitly engage with the theory of private language, his account bears a certain structural affinity to it. By reconstructing the three elements of genius, spirit, and taste, we can see that private language within an artistic context is very close to what Kant refers to as aesthetic ideas. Aesthetic ideas are characterized by infinite openness and expansiveness. They are inherently indeterminate and cannot be fully articulated through language or fixed concepts, to the extent that even the artist cannot entirely "read" or exhaust them. In the process of artistic production, genius and spirit are necessarily present, while taste functions as an aesthetic attitude or evaluative standard. It is the only one of the three elements that directly intersects with publicized space, and it is a necessary condition for the transformation of private meaning into universality and public communicability [6].

However, as Reiter points out, Kant's conceptual structure in fact separates the capacity to form aesthetic ideas from the capacity to express them. Possessing the conditions for forming clear and original aesthetic ideas does not entail possessing the ability to express those ideas [7]. Likewise, even if aesthetic ideas are formed and subsequently rendered in artistic form, this does not guarantee that the artwork can successfully communicate those ideas in a way that is intelligible to a general audience. Having genius alone, therefore, does not necessarily imply the possession of taste or spirit; and when these latter capacities are absent, an artwork cannot effectively achieve communicability. For this reason, Kant's theory can be seen as providing an important theoretical basis for the possibility of private language.

In response to the difficulties surrounding the existence of private language, Dewey, while foregrounding the communicability of art, may also offer a way of addressing the private language problem. Although Dewey

does not explicitly engage with private language theory, as Scott R. Stroud notes, Dewey holds an explicitly optimistic attitude toward the question of whether private artistic language can be communicated. The "empirical method" proposed in *Experience and Nature* appears to open up a new possibility in relation to both the dilemma articulated by Kant and Wittgenstein's insistence on the necessity of use. Dewey argues that experience itself is a "primary, unanalyzed whole", while reflective and conceptual language emerges later as an analytical tool developed in response to problematic situations [8]. As Stroud emphasizes, Dewey's experiential method implies that the generation of meaning is always rooted in the public structures of shared experience, rather than originating from incommunicable private sensations [9].

For Dewey, artistic communication is evocative in nature. It operates by re-presenting the situational conditions out of which an experience originally emerged, thereby enabling the audience to be immersed in and have that experience reawakened. Put more directly, this involves recreating the scenes and forms that constitute the experience and placing them before the viewer once again. Through the structure, form, and sensory qualities of the art object, the artist guides the audience to feel and undergo a particular kind of experience, one that may belong to the artist themselves, or one they wish the viewer to encounter and reflect upon. Dewey would argue that experience can be made directly accessible through the reconstitution of situations, allowing viewers to re-enact the perceptions and experiences that the artist intends to communicate.

In summary, although Wittgenstein adopts a critical stance and Kant's theory appears to offer support for the possibility of private language, the two do not form a straightforward opposition within this debate. For Wittgenstein, the fundamental reason for the non-existence of private language lies in the fact that we cannot fully detach ourselves from socially given public experience in order to generate a concept that has never been touched by anyone else. Kant, by contrast, does not directly defend the existence of "private language", but instead reveals the inexhaustibility of artistic meaning through the notion of aesthetic ideas. Kant argues that aesthetic ideas stimulate thought yet cannot be fully determined by any definite concept [10]. As a result, artistic experience remains unfinished and open even for the creator themselves.

However, this openness does not imply that private experience can unfold infinitely outside a public context. On the contrary, aesthetic ideas must enter *sensus communis* through sensuous form if private artistic language is to gain the possibility of being perceived and understood by others. Private artistic language thus exists precisely within this field of tension, continually pulled and constrained by its relation to publicity. Dewey's theory, by contrast, effectively sidesteps the private language question altogether. Regardless of whether private language exists, if the artist fully reconstitutes the conditions of an experience at the moment it occurred and presents them to the viewer, the viewer may in turn generate an experience that corresponds to the artist's intended communication.

### **3. The communicability and contextuality of art**

As Dewey suggests, artworks can indeed evoke experience by reproducing the conditions of its original occurrence before an audience. However, Dewey's evocative model cannot be directly applied to abstract ideas, concepts, or moral norative. Since artistic practice also encompasses these elements, Dewey's theory does exhibit certain limitations at particular moments.

Experimental data presented by Gerald C. Cupchik, Lanny Shereck, and Stacey Spiegel in *The Effects of Textual Information on Artistic Communication* provide a detailed account of the significant role that textual interpretation plays in establishing communicability between artworks and the public [11]. In the second experiment described in the article, forty-eight participants with no formal training in art were invited to view different sculptural works by two artists with sharply contrasting styles, in order to examine the distinct effects

of stylistic information and contextual information within an experimental setting. One artist produced emotionally evocative, allegorical abstract figurative works, while the other focused on intellectual and rhetorical modes of image construction.

Participants were asked to evaluate the work both before and after receiving descriptive, stylistic, or contextual information. The results showed that stylistic works exerted a strong impact during the initial viewing, whereas contextual works produced the most pronounced effects only after contextual information was provided. This suggests that while Dewey's theory of evocative experience is sufficient to support viewers in grasping the artist's private intentions during an initial encounter with stylistically driven works, this mode of transmission becomes significantly limited when applied to context-dependent works, especially in comparison with the explanatory power of textual annotation. However, with regard to textual annotation, Gerald C. Cupchik, Lanny Shereck, and Stacey Spiege argue that text is not a neutral factor that leaves the artwork untouched, but rather a variable that can "activate or diminish" processes of meaning construction. The emergence of this variable may, to some extent, be linked to the formation of public narrative space and its role as a medium of communication, since textual annotations are attached to artworks precisely because they are situated within a public narrative space and are intended to establish communicability with viewers. The literature points out that the attachment of textual explanation to artwork is not a neutral intervention, but one that can generate multiple negative effects.

To clarify the specific ways in which textual information intervenes in artistic communication, the following analysis summarizes the concrete effects identified through experimental research. First, descriptive information often tends to "banalize artworks" [11], reducing their complexity by listing visible features and thereby rendering them flatter and more ordinary. Second, formal or stylistic explanations may "fractionate" the artwork [11], breaking down an integrated visual structure into a series of technical elements, which in turn weakens the work's emotional impact and symbolic density. In addition, the authors note that certain forms of textual explanation may "intrude into the viewing experience" [11], inserting predetermined interpretive frameworks into the act of viewing and thereby limiting the space in which viewers can construct meaning based on their own experience. In such cases, the relationship between viewer and artwork shifts from immediate perception toward a reliance on language. Taken together, these phenomena indicate that textual explanation does not simply "aid understanding"; it can also, in various ways, undermine the openness and aesthetic tension of the artwork.

#### 4. Public narrative space

By public narrative space, I refer to the contextual and discursive environment through which artworks are framed and interpreted in public settings. When considering the non-neutral effects of textual interpretation on artworks, it is difficult to ignore the intended recipient of communication, namely, the public narrative space. Public narrative space can be understood as a context or environment in which viewers approach artwork with the purpose of appreciation, interpretation, or analysis. Contemporary artistic practice continues to rely heavily on public narrative spaces and extensive textual annotation to enable broader audiences to read and understand the intentions behind artworks. The dilemma of public narrative space, however, arises from its function as a primary site of interpretation. As artworks enter public narrative space, they do so within pre-existing contextual frameworks that inevitably condition how they are perceived, interpreted, and evaluated.

The dilemma of public narrative space, however, suggests that the emergence of any artwork is inseparable from context. Within such spaces, stylistic and emotional dimensions are often subordinated to contextual information, and the role of contextual framing becomes excessively emphasized in processes of transmission

and interpretation. This over-saturation of contextual information risks suppressing other modes through which artworks might otherwise communicate.

As contemporary art continues to develop, it has evolved an expanding range of narrative forms and modes of presentation. Whether in the case of highly distilled, stylistically driven works or practices that require forms of interaction with a broader public, such artworks almost invariably depend on extensive public narrative spaces and textual annotation to gain visibility and to more fully transmit their creative intentions. In effect, public narratives pace functions as a widely deployed contextual framework. By virtue of its existence, any object or event that appears within it becomes available for "serious" interpretation. This, to a certain extent, mobilizes the public's motivation to explore an artwork's intentions and meanings, enabling works to be more readily viewed and interpreted. This is precisely why contemporary art has come to rely so heavily on public narrative space.

Yet the influence of public narrative space on artworks is inherently double-sided. Without public narrative space as a preliminary condition, viewers are unlikely to attempt to understand the artist's intentions or the meanings the work seeks to convey. However, once viewers approach artworks through the contextual "filter" provided by public narrative space, they often assume by default that the artist possesses a determinate intention and a specific message to be expressed. As a result, greater effort is invested in interpreting these presumed intentions or meanings. Importantly, such interpretive efforts are carried out in a particular manner, one that tends to be rationalized, conceptualized, and mediated through language and text. This produces an illusion of communicability between artwork and viewer, established through the permissive "filter" of context. For unless the artist explicitly discloses their intentions, it is in fact difficult to ascertain what those intentions truly are.

Nevertheless, within the framework of art appreciation, we persistently presume the presence of a clear authorial intention and continue to strive to understand it. At times, however, this attempt to grasp artistic intention exceeds its proper limits, and it is precisely in such moments that interpretive confusion appears to arise.

In the Critique of the Power of Judgment, Kant draws a distinction between the contemplation of natural beauty and that of artistic products. In the case of natural beauty, judgment is often immediate and intuitive; one can arrive at a judgment of beauty without the intervention of reflective reasoning. By contrast, when judging artistic products, because art always presupposes a purpose and an intention, one must approach it through a purposive mode of aesthetic judgment, attempting to discern and evaluate the artist's intention, before the artwork itself can be properly judged [1]. While artworks are necessarily taken to be intentional products, Kant does not suggest that their meaning or intention can be straightforwardly accessed or fully determined through interpretation. Rather, the judgment of art requires a prior orientation toward purposiveness, without securing a determinate account of what that purpose consists in. "If an object is regarded as a product of art and is to be declared beautiful, then, since art always presupposes a purpose (that is, the causality of a cause), a concept must first be presupposed as the ground of judgment" [1]. What Kant establishes here is not a method for uncovering an artist's intention, but a structural condition of art judgment: the necessity of presupposing purposiveness without being able to conceptually determine its content.

Just as textual explanation helps so-called context-dependent artworks to be understood and appreciated, public narrative space itself also assists artworks in gaining attention and comprehension. Yet public narrative space does not function as an entirely positive aid to artistic understanding. A space saturated with explicit contextual information encourages viewers to subjectively impose an additional rational "filter", one that assumes the artwork must be conveying some hidden or essential message. Under the refraction of this filter, the artist's intended experiences, ideas, and emotions. Those private elements, become more susceptible to

distortion and misinterpretation, reshaped into whatever answers the public narrative space implicitly prompts viewers to seek.

This ultimately means that the challenges and dilemmas posed by private language remain unresolved. The core difficulty lies in the fact that private language cannot, on its own terms, sustain effective communicability, a difficulty that is often intensified within public narrative spaces structured by shared norms of interpretation. While the approaches discussed in this paper appear to achieve communicative effects at certain levels, they nonetheless remain subject to significant limitations. Dewey's method, for instance, is capable of evoking shared, primary experience and thus enabling the communication of artistic experience. Yet much of the remaining content within art still depends heavily on contextual information for its expression and communication.

Although contextual information can provide viewers with a perspective from which they are willing to engage with and attempt to understand artistic intention, it often relies on means that exist outside the artwork itself, most notably textual annotation. The impact of such forms of mediation remains highly contested. At the same time, public narrative space itself shapes how contextual information is received and interpreted. Public narrative space is, in essence, a special kind of context that increases viewers' willingness to engage with and appreciate artworks. Conversely, without this layer of public narrative space, viewers may lose even the basic inclination to attend to the work.

Context thus opens a channel through which communication between the artist's intention and the viewer becomes possible, yet within this channel emerge countless forms of refraction and distortion. The very characteristics of private language already affect its outward transmission, and when combined with the alienation and distortion produced by differing contexts, the possibility of communication becomes even more fragile.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper begins by introducing the philosophical problem of private language and treating it as the theoretical point of departure for understanding the dilemma of communicability in art. This move clarifies that questions surrounding the transmission of experience, ideas, and meaning in art are not merely issues of art history or medium but are fundamentally bound up with the very possibility of language, understanding, and communication. This paper then examines the relevant theories of Wittgenstein and Kant in order to map out two distinct positions on the private language problem within an artistic context and the consequences that follow them. By denying the possibility of private language, Wittgenstein insists that meaning must be grounded in public forms of use, thereby posing a fundamental challenge to the notion of transmitting "private meaning" in art. Kant, by contrast, approaches the problem through the structure of aesthetic ideas, genius, and taste. Through this framework, he reveals the inexhaustibility of artistic meaning. At the same time, this structure leaves room for the emergence of private artistic language while exposing the risk that such meaning may fail within public understanding. This discussion demonstrates that the private language problem in art does not admit a simple affirmative or negative resolution but instead constitutes a sustained theoretical tension.

The paper then introduces Dewey's experiential method of art as evocative communication, arguing that art can achieve communicability by reconstructing the conditions under which experience originally arises. However, this method shows clear limitations when confronted with abstract ideas and complex theoretical content and cannot fully replace the transmission of conceptual and contextual information. On this basis, this paper further engages experimental studies by scholars at the University of Toronto on the effects of textual

information on artistic communication, demonstrating that text and contextual framing are not neutral tools in artistic exchange. They can enhance understanding, but they can also diminish an artwork's openness and aesthetic tension.

The discussion then turns to the relationship between textual information and public narrative space, as a response to the problem of private language, arguing that while public narrative space facilitates the intelligibility of art, it may also, by pre-structuring interpretive frameworks, obscure and intensify the challenges that private language poses to artistic communicability. Finally, the paper concludes that communicability in art is not a given fact, but an unfinished condition that continually unfolds between private experience, public context, and interpretive mechanisms. Private artistic language has not been resolved within public narrative space; rather, it persists as a core tension in contemporary artistic practice, continuously amplified, obscured, and reshaped through processes of mediation and interpretation.

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