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Artspeak. The Bullshit Language of Art

Abstract

Pseudo-profound language is a stylistic means in many different contexts, like advertising, politics, economics, or even science. Contemporary visual art is notoriously known for its variant: artspeak. We develop a syntactical analysis and show how artspeak is constructed. We point out that it is "evocative" bullshit in that it aims at contextualizing art with traditional art myths (i.e., artists are, among other adjectives, autonomous, critical, or free). Furthermore, we argue that artspeak should be regarded as a particular type of bullshit as it features a unique relation to truth.

Keywords

Artspeak, Art Theory, Evocative Bullshit, International Art English

Introduction

In contemporary art exhibition announcements, catalog texts, and art magazines, we are confronted with a strange language: artspeak.[1]

> [Artists] reject binary thinking and work to reveal the fiction of dichotomies. They are probing the complexities of subjectivity—issues of race, class, and sexuality—in terms of multiple discourses and shifting social interactions. From their own life situations, often outside, displaced, or marginalized from the mainstream, they work to overcome both political divisions and entrenched tribalism; they are warriors fighting to expand and enrich the larger culture (Phillips 1993).

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[1] This work was originally conducted as an art project by *Matters of Appearance* (https://moadaily.weebly.com/whats-pc.html) in 2007. We analyzed a German mailing list with mostly exhibition announcements (echolisten.de.)

This fragment elaborates on the artists of the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Institutions like galleries or museums apparently feel obliged to explain the concept of their art shows to their visitors. However, if these texts were meant to address laypeople to make them appreciate art, why would authors choose such an academic, high-brow style? At first glance, these texts seem to emphasize a deeper meaning and relevance of the given artworks. That same style can frequently be found in mission statements of artists:

> My artistic practice involves a variety of media and deals with different political aspects of space. [My work is] dedicated to the research of the history, narrative and power-relations of different social spaces. My practice is mostly project-based and relies on institutional as well as extra-institutional archival work. In many of my projects I investigate the manner in which these archives translate into a spatial reality and what exactly are the ideas, principles and ideologies, influencing and creating public space (Peri 2021).

These blatantly obscure but common examples are not presented to emphasize that we cannot, or should not, talk about art in a meaningful way. Art has always been subject to interpretation, and with the rise of conceptual art in the 1960s, it has developed an intimate relationship with language. Arnold Gehlen argued that art had become "kommentarbedürftig"; it requires annotation or explanation (Gehlen 2016). The evolution of art has seen a continuous process of increasing intellectualization: This was partly driven by artists aspiring to emerge from the ranks of craftsmanship to making art a science proper (one might think of the development of central perspective based on geometry).[2] Whether explanation is really *required* as Gehlen believes remains to be discussed, but in contemporary art, texts of this kind will usually be provided.

In the present paper, we investigate texts that are not *part* of the artwork but rather a *commentary* of some sort, such as catalog texts and essays, description cards in art shows, exhibition teasers, press articles, criticism, and reviews. Arguably, the function of these texts is to *describe* or *explain* artworks. Empirical research shows that an audience, confronted with art it considers meaningless, tends to feel uncomfortable (Turpin *et al.* 2019, 658). However, is artspeak suited to bring clarity to hidden meaning in art? Some observations seem to contradict this:

[2] However, the idea of "explaining" art seems to contradict a common belief that art should convey emotions to the audience that cannot be expressed through language at all.

1. Artspeak sounds bloated and preposterous.
2. Many texts strongly resemble each other.
3. They seem to be only loosely related to the artwork in question.
4. The content appears incoherent and obscure.
5. Texts feel like they might be auto-generated by an algorithm.

Our introductory example features many trademarks of artspeak. The vocabulary sounds academic and specific (*dichotomy, subjectivity, marginalized*) and includes very general terms (*race, class, sexuality*). Syntactically, we find long sentences, frequently using enumerations (*outside, displaced, or marginalized*) or multiple propositions (*to overcome both x and y*). Their exact nature remains unclear, however. Looking at the content, we are confronted with a sequence of vague, unrelated statements (rejects x, probes x, works to overcome x), suggesting specific activities of an investigative character. This tension between specificity and generality makes artspeak what it is: a stylistic hybrid. It signals scientific and scholarly profoundness and relevance for issues of fundamental importance, but upon closer investigation turns out to be obscure and incoherent.

The most promising theoretical approach here seems to regard artspeak as bullshit, following Harry G. Frankfurt's seminal work "On Bullshit" (Frankfurt 2005). More specifically, artspeak might classify as *academic bullshit*, as discussed by G. A. Cohen (2013). We argue that artspeak is unique in three aspects: Its specific syntactic structure and vocabulary, which we analyze in part 1. The second part demonstrates an artspeak-specific connection to common stereotypes about art and artists ("art myths".) In part 3 we discuss artspeak's relation to truth, central to the bullshit-debate.

Part 1: Analysis

Artspeak sounds like academic bullshit, but it has its specific properties, in that a particular syntax and vocabulary is preferred. After researching numerous examples, we propose five classes of terms.

Containers

A Container is a highly general term, like *space, narrative,* or *construction.* It provides the potential to carry many different notions or ideas and thus is inherently vague. However, it suggests a precise and scientific meaning (e.g., *vector space* in mathematics). In this sense, it creates the fusion, as mentioned earlier, of specificity and generality. Some Containers are:

space, (the) political, identity, sexuality, urbanity, narrative, (the) real, architecture, relation.

The more ambiguous a container is, the better. In the humanities, *space* has become a common metaphor, e.g., "the political space of art" (Dillet and Puri 2016).[3] Artspeak morphs this metaphor into some sort of wildcard:

> Much more [the artist] is concerned with the exposability [sic!] of the space itself, which has to be hardly modified at all to become a self-contradicting statement (Echolisten 2007).

However, the overall impression of artspeak is such that it *could* make some sense. At first glance, it appears to be coherent to a certain degree, at least syntactically. However, on closer inspection, it is hard to draw any insights from it. How can space be *exposed*, or become a *statement*, albeit a *self-contradicting* one? This ambiguity is omnipresent.

Awkward nominalizations like *the real* or *the political* have been mentioned by Rule and Levine (2012). *Politics* seems all too tangible as a noun, while the monolithic *the political* results in a subtle alienation from its everyday use. An additional abstraction seems to take effect here: people can be involved in politics, we then associate some concrete action with it, whereas *the political* seems to be some vague entity, somehow attributed with political relevance. This ambiguity of artspeak-nominalizations, though, is not at all mirrored in their use. They are presented as self-evident and clear.

There are probably only so many containers, and if these constituted the complete vocabulary, artspeak would sound very repetitive. However, artspeak also offers additional terms, "instances", to exploit containers further.

Instances

Looking at the *space*-container once more, we find that it is often not used exclusively but complemented or paraphrased through other terms that allow spatial interpretation:

field, territory, order, position, gap, channel, center, periphery, transgression, void, surface, manifestation, flow.

[3] As Wolfgang Kemp (2020, 58) notes, the excessive use of the space-metaphor may be explained by *the* contemporary art genre, installation, which is basically a distribution of objects in space.

All of these are *instances* of their container (here: *space*.) Instances supply the artspeaker with material for sentences that suggest an interpretation along the lines of the container—a linguistic construction set, where each part fits nicely to another:

> […] as both an abstract space modeled upon hierarchical orderings (e.g., center, periphery) that may reinforce dominant economic relations, and as a space of ruptures, disjunctions, flux […] (Decter 2013, 262).

These two lines confront the reader with five instances of space: *center, periphery, rupture, disjunction,* and *flux*, plus the spatial preposition *upon*, let alone two appearances of the container itself. Moreover, the introductory *both* introduces two parallel lines of reasoning, confusing the readers from the outset. *Hierarchy, dominance*, and *economics* are instances of the *politics*-container.

While containers remain more or less constant over time, their instances are subject to change. There is some truth in the idea that art has always reflected upon issues of space, for instance, in connection to composition in painting. However, in contemporary art texts, *space*-instances with their allusions to urbanity, motion, and change are deeply rooted in postmodern and poststructuralist philosophy. If we compare this to a text of early 20th-century art theory, we are confronted with very different space instances. For example, in Paul Klee's "Über die moderne Kunst," we find *dimension, line, weight, angle, outline, length* (Klee 1924). According to the spirit of the time, Klee approaches space in terms of geometry (this implies no judgment on Klee's text in any way.)

The example also features two *enumerations*, another popular stylistic means. They allow for several assertions at once. A frequent enumeration is the *opposition*: *center/periphery, inside/outside, private/public*. Also, note that the container *space* in the above example is used as an *extension*, a simple way to make a statement longer and more complex. Instead of just talking about *flux,* we now have *a space of flux*. Many instances, and most containers, make good extensions: *the manifestation of x, a narrative of x, a gesture of x.*

Instances inherit the generality of their containers but constitute additional vocabulary that sounds very specific. They are not entirely arbitrary; they are in step with the zeitgeist and are thereby subject to change.

Methods

Methods are primarily manifest as the verb in artspeak-sentences. Artists may

> *interrogate, question, repurpose, reassign, explore, reveal, intervene, deterritorialize, deconstruct*.

Historically, there has not been too much emphasis on the activities of artists—except maybe in a narrower sense, concerning technical issues—until the performative turn during the 20th century. This turn becomes evident in the 1990s, marking the rise of art forms connected to a *process* rather than a completed work. Performative art and participatory concepts might include the artist and other contributors or even integrate the audience. Art "projects" are no longer just necessary to produce an artifact but regarded *as* the actual artwork. Numerous styles, like "artistic research," "social practice," or "interventions," can be seen in this context. All of these art forms require a new descriptive language and strategies of legitimization. These have to account for the aspect of performativity and therefore take the form of verbs. "*My practice involves x"* henceforth became a classic in artist's statements.

Methods are in no way chosen arbitrarily. They emphasize the claim of the artist to be on an investigative mission, doing scientific research, exposing hidden truths of significant importance, and addressing an innocent and unsuspecting audience:

> My practice involves taking things apart. I look closely at the material world to try to understand the parts that make up the whole. My work centers around examining, breaking down and celebrating material qualities and manipulating objects of personal value and social implication […]. I am interested in ordinary things and dedicated to transforming them in ways that allow for new consideration (601Artspace 2019).

In this example, it is hard to tell which parts talk about art and which about some general inclination of the artist, who is "trying to understand" something, is "interested," and then "transforms" things. The sole and faint clue we get is that this "allows for new consideration." Even if we accept that in contemporary art, artworks and artist's doings are inextricably entangled, it is doubtful that the reader could draw any insight from this passage. Contemporary art faces the problem that there seem to be no objective rules or visual qualities based on which it can be evaluated. Artists' intentions become increasingly significant if art objects become visually generic, and qualitatively indistinguishable from other objects.

Linkage

What would readers expect from art texts? Probably meaningful explanations, relevant background information, or interesting opinions—all related to the artwork or the artist. Either way, the text should contain statements with which one might agree or disagree. Thus, these would have to be at least in principle true or false—they should express propositions, technically speaking, such as *fire causes smoke*. The claim that fire *causes* smoke is clear and very strong. The resulting proposition here is established by linking terms precisely: *fire* and *smoke* by *causation*. Artspeak, however, avoids clear propositions by relating terms most mysteriously, by *linkage*. This obscurity is often used to establish a connection between the generic parts of artspeak and the concrete artwork or artist. Otherwise, artspeak would sound detached from its object. The above example featured *"my practice involves," "my work centers around,"* and *"I am interested in."* Indeed, these allow for true or false claims. Artspeak's classic *"my practice involves x"* is a good fit for a proposition; either the artist's practice does involve something or not. However, this does not constitute a very informative assertion, as its relevance is not explained.

The word *like*, used to indicate examples, can provide a simple form of linkage.

> By devising and provoking human encounters in spaces that are embodied in architectural structures like the bamboo maze and teahouse, [the artist] encourages visitors to pause, make time and space to experience something new (Garlandmag 2018).

In this paragraph, the only term related to the specific artwork is *bamboo maze and teahouse*. The rest of the text is generic, and it is linked to the artwork by *like.* The art object is introduced as an example, suggesting a tangible illustration. However, the rest of the statement is highly abstract ("encounters in spaces embodied in structures"). Thus, it is hard to tell if the *teahouse* is an appropriate example since the *like*-linkage is vague. It does not tell us in which respect precisely the object serves as an example. In that manner, the text raises the impression that it talks specifically about the actual artwork. However, whether the *teahouse* is a convincing example (for whatever the sentence says) remains open.

Linkage makes artspeak sound as if it contained concrete assertions, but without saying too much. Artworks *are about* or *deal with* something. They *question* or *criticize,* or *interrogate*. Artists themselves are *interested in*, are

obsessed with, or *exploring* or *undermining* something. Why, though, should the interests of artists be relevant? How far does an artwork *deal* with anything, and what would that mean for its quality or audience?

Attractors

Attractors reach beyond the syntactical level and address artspeak's content. The contemporary art scene is interested in some topics more than in others. Thematically, artspeak revolves (hence, *attractors*) around a narrow spectrum of topics. They seem to raise issues of politics in general, most notably political activism, making *politics* the essential attractor. Nothing is more sacrosanct than the idea of "political art." These texts cover areas like human rights, the current administration, globalization, colonialism, surveillance, immigration, or refugees. However, not all things political appear to be of the same degree of interest. Agriculture, commerce, labor, and transportation seem to be unattractive in comparison. This unattractiveness is probably not because they might be considered profane and therefore not entirely appealing, but rather because the preferred attractors share a common benefit: they aim to support corresponding art myths. They elevate the artist's image as someone on a mission of investigation and research—an incorruptible admonisher, unveiling hidden truths. Moreover, the artist appears as an activist with an outstanding capability of leveraging political change. Art institutions make no exception here: Consider art show titles like "Open Source: Art at the Eclipse of Capitalism" (artconnect.com 2015). Art stands for openness and freedom, and it seems to suggest that capitalism is art's enemy. Contextualized in such a way, curators claim social and political relevance for their exhibitions:

> Artists are addressing political unease in a carefully chosen space next to the Trump World Tower (Sayej 2019).

Another significant attractor is *sexuality.* Questions such as sexual self-image, gender, feminism, or queerness revolve around personal identity matters. This attractor seems to be based on stereotypes of what it means to be an artist. One of these is the *myth of autonomy*: a significant asset of the successful artist is originality. Since it has become challenging to produce genuinely original art, the focus moves even more on the artist. Hence, an interesting background story, allowing for a CV that stands out from the rest, is beneficial. This construction of identity offers a promise: all of it is somehow rele-

vant for—and inscribed in—the artist's work, which expresses these properties. This information may comprise personal history and circumstances, character traits, or relevant trivia. Under this symbolic charge, at least that seems to be the idea, the artwork becomes an effective one, a *good* artwork.

It may appear unfair if political awareness is somehow construed as ambiguous or even phony in this argument. However, we are merely disputing whether artspeak succeeds in establishing any comprehensive relation between attractors and art.

Initial Summary

We have suggested structural elements that outline how artspeak is constructed. Now we have a clearer picture of this structure:

1. Artspeak adheres to *form over function*. It is produced by repeating a small variety of design patterns, indicating that structure comes first. If artspeakers wanted to make a certain point, such structural constraints would not be of support but rather a hindrance.
2. The claim that artspeak is primarily *vacuous* is a stronger claim than (1). It means that it does not contain explicit assertions or underlying propositions. Even if we understand the partial terms, their relation is obfuscated by what we described above as "linkage." *Form over function* does not mean that it is impossible to express fruitful thoughts in artspeak's syntactical framework, no matter how formally constraining it may be. Artspeak does not make much use of this option, in any case. However, giving relevant information, or explaining why art is meaningful, might be what readers expect from art texts.
3. An advantage for writers is artspeak's *convenience*. The observation that authors abundantly use these structures shows how beneficial they are. As a tool, they allow for the fast and straightforward production of large amounts of texts in an academic-sounding style.
4. Artspeak is *efficient*. Empirical research shows that the rating of artworks in connection with pseudo-profound texts is increased: artspeak "makes the art grow profounder" (Turpin *et al.* 2019).

Part 2: Myths and Evocation

Is this all there is to artspeak? If this were the case, it could almost be replaced by any kind of bullshit-text. However, artspeak uses *specific* vocabulary as containers, instances, or methods. It is not only pseudo-profound but

evocative bullshit. Even people who are not interested in art have internalized certain (primarily positive) stereotypes or *myths* about artists and artworks. We argue that artspeak serves to evoke art-related myths, and this is the second aspect where it differs from generic academic bullshit.

Art Myths

The potential ascribed to art is rooted in myth. Following Ernst Cassirer (2010), myths are early forms of interpreting the world. For example, they express a specific concept of *causation*: Spatial proximity alone can establish a relation of cause and effect (i.e., the effectiveness of a talisman carried on the body or the presence of a healer.) The domain of myths is the material world. They translate everything into objects, people, movement, or actions rather than into abstract thinking. This elevation aligns well with ideas related to art and serves as a foundation to ascribe a mythical potential: an artwork, an inanimate object, supposedly sparks strong emotions or rational insights, just by a person being close to it. In that spirit, the audience prefers the "authentic" original to a mere copy of an artwork, which lacks the "aura." Religious (e.g., Christian) art has been ascribed a spiritual potential, "to convey the idea of the supernatural" (Gombrich 1995, p. 183). In contemporary art, however, the focus of art myths appears to have shifted to art that addresses sociopolitical issues.

A particular type of art myth is the *artist's myth*. Artists enjoy a specific image: autonomy, personal integrity, sociopolitical awareness, and eccentric character traits are all associated with them. These stereotypes are echoes from the concept of the genius of romanticism. They are rooted in artist anecdotes of antiquity, as Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz (2010) point out in their seminal work "Die Legende vom Künstler." They argue that these legends are the earliest manifestation of artist biographies and are still being passed on to modern times. They are narratives of a mythical character and construction of how artists see themselves and how they would like to be perceived by others.[4]

[4] In romanticism, the overall picture was refined. Christian Demand (2012, 143) contemplates Van Gogh's biographies and identifies religious motives in them. Each of these motives constitutes an art myth in itself, and put together, they add up to a narrative reminiscent of Christ's passion. Biographers highlight Van Gogh's sense of artistic mission, but tell a story of humiliation as his career turned out to be a professional failure. Nevertheless, he kept on working frantically, resulting in depression and almost self-destruction. He died young and in seclusion, and his work experienced professional attention only posthumously (this being the "myth of resurrection" for Demand.)

In order to analyze how artspeak evokes art myths, we compile a (by no means complete) list of some of these myths.

1. *The myth of creativity*: creativity is a human value in itself. Being creative is beneficial or even necessary in a competitive society. Artists are the archetypical embodiment of creativity: creators of the unique and highly susceptible even to faint or subliminal phenomena, unrecognized by ordinary people.
2. *The myth of enlightenment*: the artist is an authority for ethical guidelines, a sagacious critic of socio-political conditions. Using art as the appropriate tool, they raise awareness of important issues.
3. *The myth of efficacy*: Art is an effective means of bringing about political or social change.
4. *The myth of Robin Hood*: Artists are defenders of the weak, the poor, the underprivileged.
5. *The myth of autonomy*: In art and personal life, artists are autonomous, upright, and independent. External conditions do not influence their lifestyle and art.
6. *The myth of representation*: Art creates meaning or is meaningful. "Meaning" in this context does not stand for any subjective experience recipients might have; instead, it aims at traditional forms of knowledge: concrete questions, imperatives, propositional (i.e., true/false) statements.
7. *The myth of science*: art is a feasible method for generating scientific progress.

With the rise of modernity in the 20th century, the expansion of visual culture in all domains makes it difficult to get a clear grasp on the concept of the artist. In very general terms, the artist as a public persona serves as a projection space in a competitive, urban society focused on economic success, efficiency and social status. As Andreas Reckwitz (2012) points out, the idea of the autonomous creator becomes a major role model. The artist is the epitome of individuality, which seems unattainable by ordinary people. Artist's lifestyles appear to be free and independent, though by virtue of their unique talent and genius, they remain unreachable idols. Even more, creativity is a promise of an "aesthetic utopia". Reckwitz holds, that creativity is an inherently revolutionary principle, with the artist as anti-bourgeois personification. At the same time, in art paradoxically lies a foreshadowing of a utopian state of harmony. Moreover, in a reminiscence to the notion of *melancholia*, the artist's fragile mental health is an expression of their outstanding sensitiveness, confronted with a hostile world.

The claims implied by this selection of myths appear to be at least questionable. However, most people seem to accept, at least subconsciously, the assumption of an emancipatory, ethical, or scientific potential of art. Hence, artspeakers can rely on a set of preconceptions about art and artists shared by their readers. Their validity just has to be reconfirmed by evoking these art myths.

Myth and language, propagated by repetition, variation, narration, and ritual, are interdependent and presuppose one another (Cassirer 2010, 49, Vol. 2). Artspeak is the language to evoke art myths.

Evocation

Art is based on myth, making it challenging to find conclusive rational arguments to praise specific artworks. As our analysis shows, artspeak is constructed such that it avoids clear and relevant propositions. This strategy makes sense, considering the theoretical tradition of anti-essentialism as adopted by Weitz (1950) or Borgeest (1979). In their view, there are no objective criteria to discern art from non-art or good art from bad art. Hence, to argue in favor of artwork using arguments depending on such criteria is problematic.

However, the validity of myths does not have to be justified—myths are *evoked*. As mentioned above, the strategy of evocation is one of repetition, variation, narration, and ritual. In artspeak, terms with a positive connotation related to art myths are repeated in variations. These have the character of a series of exclamations. It is not important *what* they say, but instead *that* they say it and repeat it. Artspeak forms grammatically coherent sentences that give the impression of a narrative but are devoid of inherent logic. The audience already believes in the essential validity of art myths. Hence, they do not have to be convinced anymore. Reading or writing artspeak is much closer to a ritual than to a line of reasoning. It is an incantation specifically targeting art myths.

As an example, if artspeak references the idea of "political art" or "social practice," this suggests: art is capable of expressing concrete, tangible political claims and demands (the *myth of representation*), art can cause or leverage changes (the *myth of efficacy*), and it is the purpose of art to do so (the *myth of enlightenment*), and the artist will pursue this mission regardless of opposition (the *myth of autonomy*). Moreover, artworks that are capable of this are somehow better than others. The political artist, the myth purports, is good: critical and subversive. This implication is supported by

methods like "question," reveal" or "envision" (the *myth of enlightenment*); "reassign," "intervene," "provoke," "confront" (*efficacy*); "understand," "consider," "ask" (*representation*); "examine," "explore," "experiment" (*science*).

Part 3: Artspeak and Bullshit

Our analysis shows that artspeak is construed in such a way that makes it hard to tell what it wants to express. This technique has been described as "Obskuranz" (*obscurance*) (Meibauer 2020, 42-44). Someone might genuinely believe in a proposition. However, instead of making a clear statement, artspeakers obscure their text using incomprehensible language. This obscurity may even happen unintentionally. We have reviewed some of the artspeak's practical tools for obscurance, like containers, extensions, oppositions, or linkage. Hence, on a formal level, it seems evident that artspeakers obscure the meaning of their text. However, to classify a given text as bullshit, we have to consider the notion of *truth*.

Harry G. Frankfurt (2005) states that the "bull" has no concern with the truth value of his propositions. The emphasis of Frankfurt-bulls is on persuasion, regardless of the truth. Cohen (2013) argues that we cannot know anything about the intentions of the author. We, therefore, should focus on the text itself. If it is "unclarifiable," this indicates bullshit. This indication can be understood in the following sense: The text may be ambiguous. If we manage to paraphrase it in such a way that it 1) clearly expresses a comprehensible proposition and 2) can still be identified with the original, then it is *clarified*. The obvious question is, how can we define clarity? Cohen (2013, 105-106) presents a "sufficient condition of unclarity": if the negation of a text is as plausible as the original, it is unclear. Negation, of course, only makes sense in connection with propositional statements, as "plausibility" roughly can be defined as "deemed likely to be true."

How are artspeak and truth related? The style of artspeak borrows from academia, and that sets a scholarly and scientific context in which it is to be evaluated. In Cohen's (2013, p. 105) words, we would expect "an appropriate connection to truth." While artspeak might technically be clarifiable, the resulting unobscured statement would not be relevant to its context. Artspeak is primarily made to evoke art myths, so it is futile to look for *relevant* hidden truths. Broadly speaking, there is no "appropriate connection to truth" since there is no connection to truth at all. One might object that there can be factual statements in art texts, e.g., "this is an oil painting of size x" but that would be a trivial statement. We might also consider the overarching

idea of the validity of an art myth as the message: "This artwork is effective to cause political change." However, even if this were true, this message is not expressed in the sentences of artspeak. Consider the example, "She is interested in embodied cognition" (Micemagazine 2017). This sentence evokes the myth of science, but although it is not obscured, it does not express this claim in any way. Instead, it describes the artist being "interested" in something not quickly brought into her artwork by the reader.

Following Cohen (2013), we might then consider comparing artspeak to poetry. Poems metaphorically express something that is not explicitly mentioned in their words. We would never disregard poetry for the reason that it is not sufficiently clear in expressing its propositions, as propositional content is usually only of minor relevance in it. It belongs to the main features of poetry that it evokes emotions or imagery in the reader. For that reason, a comparison to artspeak might seem compelling, as we have identified artspeak above as evocative, too. However, we recognize a poem when we see it. We are not being led to the wrong assumption that it is anything else than a poem. This is different with artspeak—it's not written like a poem but like an academic paper, making readers expect information, arguments, and clarity. Hence, artspeakers display "indifference to how things really are" (Frankfurt 2005, 34), misrepresenting the text type to begin with. As a consequence, a comparison between artspeak and poetry may be interesting, but will not make artspeak appear more substantial.

Artspeak does not contain relevant propositions. Hence it cannot be clarified in a relevant way. Therefore, artspeak would technically qualify as Cohen-bullshit. Nevertheless, artspeak was never meant to contain propositions, and instead, the goal is to evoke preconfigured conceptions or emotions about art in the reader. Thus, it should be regarded as a unique type of bullshit, namely, evocative bullshit. Generally, evocative bullshit could be defined by 1. a lack of relevant propositional content, 2. an evocation of preconfigured beliefs or emotions in the reader, and 3. a syntactical structure to obscure 1. and 2.

Conclusion

In the first part, we have analyzed the syntactic structure of artspeak, characterized by repeated, generic design patterns that obscure any meaning. However, as it is by construction not intended to express relevant propositional statements, artspeak contains no meaning that could be clarified in a relevant way. Hence, artspeak cannot be assessed by its relation to truth.

Instead, it contains a message between the lines to reactivate or *evoke* pre-configured moods or attitudes in the reader. Art myths best describe these preconceptions. The following features define artspeak most clearly: 1. the absence of propositional content relevant to art, 2. the evocation of art myths, 3. artspeak-specific syntax and vocabulary as described above.

It seems plausible that artspeakers feel obliged to provide a text to go with the artwork due to institutional demand. In this situation, artspeak allows for a "low-cost strategy for gaining prestige" (Turpin *et al.* 2019, 659). Empirical research shows that writing bullshit is more likely if the author feels they have not much knowledge to share, and also if they assume, they will not have to justify it, as it will not be critically questioned by indifferent readers (Petrocelli 2018, 255). The latter point is relevant as most artspeak readers probably have no clear idea about what they expect from such a text.

The analysis of evocative bullshit presented in this paper might well be modified or extended to apply to other domains than just art texts. The first part outlines the syntactical structure of artspeak's domain, but some of the given patterns would apply to any kind of academic bullshit, albeit with a few alterations. Stereotypes of mythical nature targeted by artspeak are discussed in part 2. Evocation of such preconceptions and emotions are of interest where texts convey a message between the lines to manipulate the reader. For instance, consider advertising: Chevrolet's slogan "The Heartbeat of America" is neither a true nor a false statement about a car, but meant to evoke certain emotions and the American myth. In part 3 we emphasize a more general idea: namely, that bullshit is not always characterized by its relation to underlying truth or falsity, but on many occasions is not based on propositions at all. Artspeak is an intriguing example as both author and reader might be completely unaware of this fact and truly believe that they exchange substantial information.

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