

Visual Thinking in Art and Constructive Play

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New York University

“A picture is worth a thousand words”

Psychology of aesthetic experience

- Sensation and perception
- Memory and connected semantic networks
- Reward and emotion regulation
- Self relevance and personal meaning



Three Examples

- Wassily Kandinsky
- Vietnam War Memorial
- Constructive Adult Sandplay



1. Wassily Kandinsky

Visual symbolism in art changes in the arc of life transitions

- At age 30 leaves law and economics for art (1896).
- The horse and rider dominates progressively abstract compositions in early paintings.
- Iconography evolves over 10 years to become “non-objective” – **no reference to external world**.
- With no identifiable objects to intellectualize feelings dominate in response to **sensations of color and form**. “Inner necessity” and the spiritual in art.
- Writes *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*
- Founds *Blaue Reiter* (*Blue Rider*) organization



Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944)

Transitional object

- Provides a gateway between the magical thinking of childhood and realities of adult logical thinking (Winnicott, 1953)
- The abstracted horse and rider was a transitional vehicle in reverse: **recapturing early magical, sensation-based perceptions that evoke 'inner necessity' - emotive, spiritual responses to art.**



“Like all children, I passionately loved to ride horseback.”

(Kandinsky, 1945)



First phase: Non-objective Expressionism (1912, Russia)

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Contact: adrienne.gans@nyu.edu



Horse and Rider motif appears the year Kandinsky dies Last painting: Tempered Élan (1944)



Vietnam War Memorial (1982)

Maya Lin, Architect/Artist

Public art that invites engagement



Wall Memorial as Public Art

Gestalt psychology and art
(Arnheim, 1977, 1969; Werner, 1940).

Perception itself is intelligent

- 200 ft. triangular walls of polished black granite – a communal tombstone
- Physiognomic property of extended arms – holding environment and support
- War dead names (52K) in movement rising from earth and falling back to it

Wall triggers mourning, reflection and interaction



Reactions: Contact, support, leaning



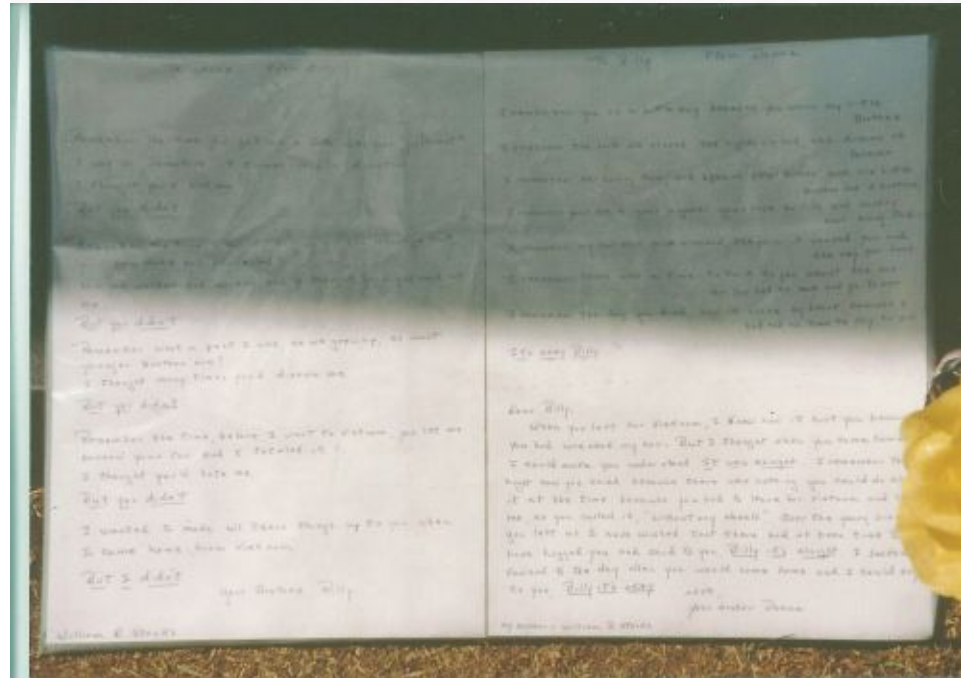
Objects left &
viewers engage

On **Left** (in voice of deceased):

“Remember the time before I went.., you let me borrow your car and I totaled it? I thought you'd hate me. But you didn't. I wanted to make it up to you when I came home... But I didn't.
Your brother.”

On **right** (from surviving sister)

“When you left.. I knew how it hurt you because you had wrecked my car.. I thought when you came home I could make you understand it was alright. I have wished..to have hugged you and said... it's alright, it's OK.
Love, your sister.”



Intimate confessions
Left as objects for public

Lin's abstract wall, with its highly polished surface and extended arms, functions as a holding environment (Winnicott, 1953) and alters perception to a consciously reflective mode, facilitating active mourning of war dead and a generation's passing.

Environmental and public art
primes personal memory and associated emotion
inviting responsive engagement.



Constructive Play

Aesthetic experience in building sandplay scenes

Sandplay – Adult process for building (& rebuilding) life narratives

- Three simple objects tell a complex story.
 - Each object activates a web of associations in memory.
- Aesthetic architecting of an inner and outer landscape.
- Integration of intellectual and emotive processes related to self.

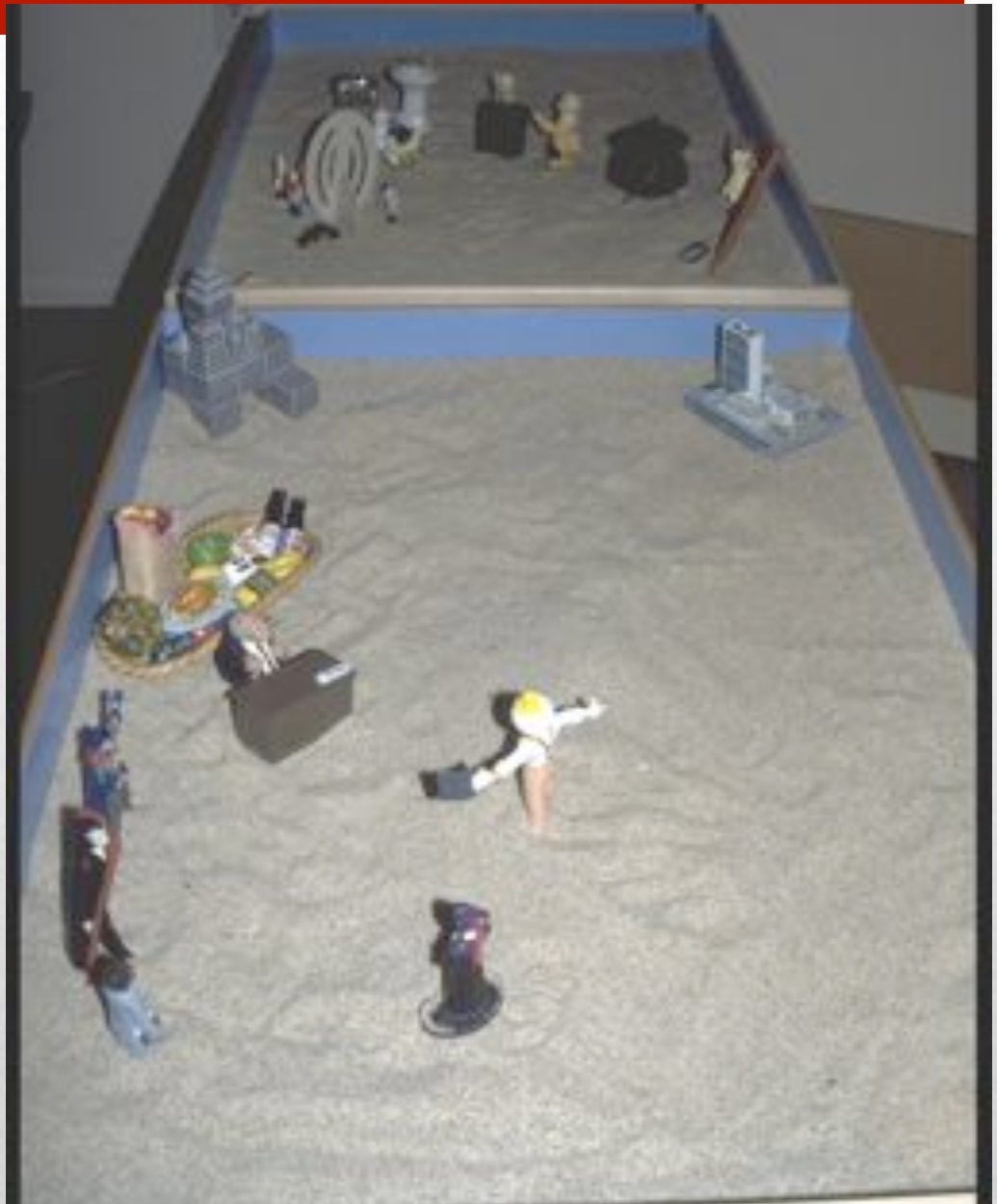


“There are practice games, symbolic games, and games with rules, **while constructive games constitute the transition from all three to adaptive behavior.**”
(Piaget, 1962 p.164)

The use of space as a form of visual thinking has meaning

Reading the use of space

- Position of self
- Position of customers
- Position of benefits





New solution that “feels right” visually:
The circle, collaboration, new leadership symbols



Alignment of personal leadership goal is mirrored in...



...the composition of organizational goals

- **Play**
Ventilates thinking and allows incubating ideas to surface non-verbally into narratives.
- **Construction**
Kinesthetic, tactile building + visualization engages the player without words.
- **Attention to aesthetics**
Selecting objects, arranging and viewing scenarios feels rewarding.

Constructive Play as Aesthetic Visual Thinking

What ties these three examples together?

Response to art that **moves us** activates neural pathways with interconnections among:

- Processing visual sensations
 - Higher order thinking and sense making
 - Reward centers and emotion regulation
 - Self referential thought that is forward looking
-
- This “**default mode network**” is only activated when art “moves us” compared to viewing art that does not move us.
Individual differences reflect a mirroring between the art and the personal. (Vessel, E. & Rubin, N., 2010)

Neuroaesthetics

Concluding Thoughts - Aesthetic Visual Thinking

“...Aesthetics is all about newly created and reconfigured value, about something that wasn't there in quite the same way before, something that was **in part created in the brain** and that leaves traces in how **we** go forward.”

(Starr, G., 2013, *Feeling Beauty*, p.145)

Is a picture worth a thousand words?

- Pictures are cues to complex semantic memory networks
 - Communication across specialized brain regions



Cave painting of horse with pectiform at Lascaux, France, 15,000-17,000 BCE.

Thank you

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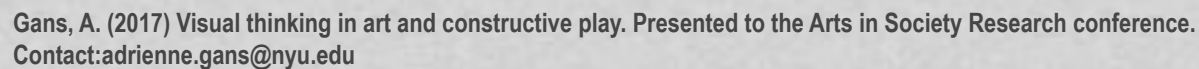
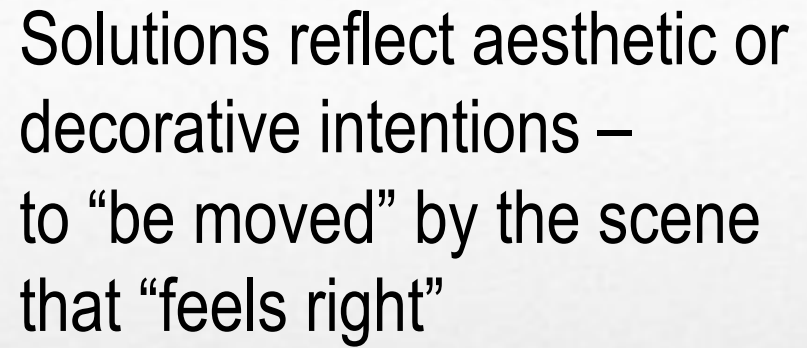
Second phase: Bauhaus (1921 moves to Germany)
Iconography changes with life changes



Third phase: Biomorphics

Bauhaus closes (1933), moves to Paris

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Work Life Balance

Creating a beautiful retreat (2) to reduce stress and release blocks in initial restricted business planning (1) scenario...frees up plan (3)

Attention to the aesthetics integral

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