

# “I WAS INTERESTED IN ...” INTEREST AND INTUITION IN ART DISCOURSE

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“How is it that something awakens my interest? That I am preoccupied with something, that I turn my attention toward a matter, that I set myself a task? Whether in practical or in theoretical life, what is the sense of the statement: That interests me?”<sup>1</sup>

## I.

In this text, I am interested in pondering the semantics of an expression which belongs to the overall phraseology which seems have gained currency – even to the point of inflation – within the discourse of contemporary art, particularly when such discourse is performed/enacted by the artists themselves.

I am interested in the notion of what might be referred to tentatively as “artistic interest,” that is to say: in the kind of “interest” which is invoked when artists raise claims (whether in speech or writing) about the extent to which these interests have crucially structured/led toward an individual work or a body of work. I attempt to locate the expression “I’m interested in ...” within the history of discourses of modern/contemporary art, but also within the larger historical semantics of the term “interest.”

To this end, I want to begin with a longer quote from an interview with Dan Graham, a conceptual, performance, and installation artist who is also a writer, by celebrity curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, who has interviewed – quite notoriously – hundreds of artists in recent years. The interview, which took place in New York in 2001, may be regarded as an exemplary instance of the kind of “interest” talk that has gradually replaced (or displaced) notions of “intention” and “intuition” within self-explanatory and self-legitimizing discourses on and around art.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Maybe we could start by talking about gardens and your first works and pavilions in relation to gardens. When did this interest in gardens start?

Dan Graham: I think I got interested in gardens because of the regionalization of art in France in the 80s. There were many chateaux, in different regional areas, and the chateau was on an overlay of gardens. Or maybe it actually began in Münster (“Skulptur Projekte Münster”, 1997), when I did this piece with Klaus Bussmann, Octagon (or Fun House) for Münster (1997). This piece was based on an area around an octagonal Baroque palace. [...] Gardens were always important to me; after I first researched them, I realized that the first museums were not the enlightenment museums but, as [Daniel] Buren talks about, Renaissance period gardens. They were for the aristocrats – educational. They also contained Disney-like elements like water tricks and archaeological remains. They were allegorical in terms of poetry, narrative, and philosophy. I became very interested in the eighteenth-century, allegorical English garden, which also contained allegories of politics.[2]

To a degree, Graham’s far-reaching answer seems to illustrate Susan Sontag’s aphoristic statement, “My idea of a writer: someone interested in ‘everything’” The first thing that grabbed my attention, however, was the interviewer’s question: “When did this interest in gardens start?” The speech act is significant in itself, for it not only indicates an interest in a specific interest of the artist, but also performatively insinuates ((elicits??)) a specific kind of answer, a response that should at best be informative in regard to this very question.

Graham does not disappoint the expectations contained in the question. He discloses the genealogy of his interest in gardens and garden architecture in a way that – at least in the published version of the interview – oscillates between the anecdotal and the conceptual. The first sentence of his reply, certainly, seems odd enough: “I think I got interested in gardens because of the regionalization of art in France in the 80s.” Graham reflects upon his interests and their generation as if these were objects (or better: beings) of his own and others’ observation and critique. Interests, in other words, are regarded as belonging to the major resources of individual artistic production as much as to the stuff that informs art criticism.

However, Graham’s reference to the “regionalization of art in France in the 80s” remains elliptical, unless one is familiar with Jack Lang’s attempts to decentralize the French cultural landscape; in this case, the allusion may carry some meaning in regard to the garden theme.

Continuing with his answer, Graham throws all kind of information into the mix: the new attention to garden architecture in the French provinces in the 1980s, the baroque garden in Münster, to which he refers, the long-standing importance of gardens for him, the historical relationship between gardens and museums as sites of education, the allegorical character of gardens. Graham’s answer concludes with the remark that in the process of his research, he had become “very interested” in the political allegories of English eighteenth century gardening as well.

One feature of this interview is apparent already after the first exchange of question and response. Dan Graham speaks about his artistic practice and about the development of ideas and themes for his work in such a way that a specific, associative-erudite mode of historical and philosophical research emerges

now to figure prominently in this self-explanatory and communicative act; furthermore, the peculiar role of describing the emergence and development of one's own interests becomes pertinent, i.e., the sense of their operative weight in the conception and the making of a work.

Thus it is not only the character and content of this artist's "interests" which are telling, i.e. the way in which they indicate a range of forms of knowledge and insights that clearly and almost conspicuously exceed the realm of technical and formal decision-making in the process of art-making. What I find remarkable is the very function of marking, defining, and displaying one's "interests" as discursive events in their own right.

## II.

Now, in the field of art and aesthetics, the notion of "interest" has a particular and rather well-known history. I cannot delve too deeply in the matter here, but in order to propose an explanation for the particularities of the currency of phrases such as "When did your interest start..." or "I'm interested in ...," I want to digress briefly and discuss the category of "interest" as it was deployed and developed in the early period of aesthetics and aesthetic theory.

Around the turn eighteenth century, the semantics of "interest" shifted from an emphasis on the pejorative – as in the notion of the "self-interest" of the individual – to a new mediating function located between passion and reason. In the eighteenth century, "interest governs the world" became a paradigmatic, proverbial statement; in 1977, the economist and historian of ideas Albert O. Hirschman made it the focus of his book *The Passions and the Interests*.<sup>[3]</sup> His thesis was that the individual's economic interests ought to ensure control over his volatile, incalculable passions.

In the realm of literary and aesthetic theory, "interest" designated a particular form of psychic and aesthetic empathy and directedness.<sup>[4]</sup> Furthermore, the notion of "interest" gained a certain notoriety as a conceptual alternative to the "beautiful." Diderot advises the poet to render his situations "avec tout l'art imaginable." otherwise "vous n'intéressez pas."<sup>[5]</sup> In the eighteenth century, the poetics of the interesting covers the interest of the object of representation, the interest of the representation itself, and the interest of the resultant experience.<sup>[6]</sup> In his article "Intéressant," composed for the supplement to Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, the art theoretician Johann Georg Sulzer distinguished between the interesting and the indifferent. Here, as well as in Sulzer's 1773 *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste*, the "interesting" comes to refer to the qualities/features (even the "most important" ones) of the aesthetic object, and not of the subject of aesthetic practice – although Sulzer also mentions that the artist "is supposed to be interesting," that is: in this capacity capable of producing interesting art; furthermore he claims that the artist should be a philosopher as well as a morally sound man. With Christian Garve, a mid-eighteenth century so-called "popular philosopher" (*Populärphilosoph*), the notion of the interesting assumes another turn. In his *Einige Gedanken über das Interessirende* [Some Thoughts on the Interesting], published in 1771 [and 1779], the interesting refers to a particular mode of attention, one instigated by the aesthetic work, which must moreover be distinguished from the kind of attention the reader or observer directs towards a text or an image that she or he is obliged to read or watch with the

objective of professional usefulness or economic gain.

The interesting, Garve asserts, is an effortless, unstrained, expectant form of attention that attends to the “interesting” work but is not interested in any end outside of this experience itself .[7] In many ways, Garve’s “interesting” seems close to Kant’s “disinterestedness,” but is in fact only partially so, for Kant wanted to wrest the aesthetic judgment from any dependency on the psychologism of fascination or expectation.

In his Critique of Judgment, Kant defines “interest” as the “satisfaction that we combine with the representation of the existence of an object.” The question of whether something is beautiful, however, shall be independent of our interest in knowing “whether there is anything that is or that could be at stake, for us or for someone else, in the existence of the thing,” and resides instead in “how we judge it in mere contemplation (intuition or reflection).”[8]

### III.

By leaping ahead in time nearly two centuries, I would like to point out that this determinate, Kantian disinterest in the “existence of the thing” was also a major albeit implicit reference for the American critic Michael Fried in his notorious essay on Minimalism which he published under the title “Art and Objecthood” in the June 1967 issue of *Artforum*. Fried attacked the “theatrical” temporality and the literalness of minimalist work by artists such as Tony Smith, Donald Judd or Robert Morris. An often underrated aspect of Fried’s critique is the parlance of “interest” and “interesting” that he, again and again, quotes from texts and interviews by the artists mentioned, as if to insinuate the presence of a suspicious connection between this term (or terminology) and the fatal trend towards theatricality in their works by them, the symptom toward which he directs his fiercest accusations.

In the following, I provide one or two examples of Fried’s deployment of the trope of “interest” against those he finds guilty of having betrayed the project of modernism – which, in his view, is not one of eliciting “interest” in the beholder, but one of being utterly “convincing.”

Speaking about the “apparent hollowness of most literalist work – the quality of having an inside,” their blatant anthropomorphism, Fried quotes the sculptor Tony Smith who had said in a 1966 interview: “I’m interested in the inscrutability and mysteriousness of the thing” – and: “More and more I’ve become interested in pneumatic structures. In these all of the material is in tension [...]”

Fried comments: “Smith’s interest in pneumatic structures may seem surprising, but it is consistent with his own work and with literalist sensibility generally.”[9] An individual or even idiosyncratic interest in something like “pneumatic structures,” therefore, may betray an interest (on a more fundamental level, so to speak) in the aesthetic ideology of anthropomorphism and theatricality.

Thus, Fried writes in the same paragraph: “It is in the interest, though not explicitly in the name, of theatre that literalist ideology rejects both modernist painting and, at least in the hands of its most distinguished recent practitioners, modernist sculpture.”[10] Fried accuses the Minimalist artists of having “preoccupations,” such as a preoccupation with time and duration, which run counter to Fried’s conviction that the modernist reveals/manifests

itself wholly “at every moment.”[11]

Since the Minimalists, in Fried’s view, neither possess normative ideas of “value” or “quality,” nor a working definition of “art,” they cultivate a sense of uncertainty that is highly enervating for the critic. As evidence for this “problematic character of the literalist enterprise” Fried cites Donald Judd’s claim that “A work needs only to be interesting.” The quote derives from Judd’s essay “Specific Objects,” published in 1965. Fried not only forgot to footnote this reference; he also detached this sentence from its immediate context and, moreover, linked it via his own essay to a dismissive remark by his mentor Clement Greenberg about “‘interesting’ incidents” in a work of art.[12]

Following the erratic statement quoted by Fried, Judd had qualified the claim that a work needs only to be interesting by saying: “It isn’t necessary for a work to have a lot of things to look at, to compare, to analyze one by one, to contemplate. The thing as a whole, its quality as a whole, is what is interesting.”[13] For Fried (reading Judd), the fact that “all that matters is whether or not a given work is able to elicit and sustain (his) interest” leads to the conclusion that to be “merely interesting” is a “tougher charge” to bring against a Minimalist work than that of being “boring.” [14]

Judd’s reaction to this distorted usage of his statement followed in 1969 in an article entitled “Complaints” that appeared in the London art journal *Studio International*. “Fried’s article ‘Art and Objecthood’ [...] was stupid”, Judd wrote. “He cross-referenced Bob Morris, Tony Smith and myself and argued against the mess. Smith’s statements and his work are contradictory to my own. Bob Morris’ Dada interests are very alien to me and there’s a lot in his dogmatic articles that I don’t like. I was especially irked by Fried’s ignorant misinterpretation of my use of the word ‘interesting.’ I obviously use it in a particular way but Fried reduces it to the cliché ‘merely interesting.’”[15]

This rebuttal features two different usages of the terminology of “interest” and of the “interesting.” Obviously, Judd’s criticism of Fried’s forced misreading of his own use of the word “interesting” bears the mark of an understanding/concept of language that underscores the acute attention Judd demands from his readers. By virtue of its deliberate shifts from a pejorative or dismissive definition of the word “interesting” to a valorising one which emphasizes a work’s “quality as whole,” Judd’s 1965 essay constitutes a remarkable contribution to the semantics of the “interesting.”

This use of the word “interesting” focuses strongly on the side of the object, which may (or may not) elicit an impression of wholeness in the beholder. Fried’s intimation that the “interesting” minimalist work is mainly about the “interest” produced within the viewer (or within Donald Judd as an artist), then, is hardly supported by Judd’s text.

Judd’s repudiation of Robert Morris’ “Dada interests,” however, is of a slightly albeit significantly different order. It is not a proposition or claim about the quality of a specific work, but instead alludes to a particular set of inclinations, of sympathies and historical references – to the preoccupations (to use Fried’s words) of a fellow artist.

Robert Morris’s practices are characterized by his “Dada interests” – at least as from Judd’s point of view. But this hardly goes without saying. In the modernist criticism of Greenberg, Fried, and others, the individual “interests” of the producers of modernist art are of no importance at all. These had to be ignored in favor of the teleological project of medium specificity, opticality,

flatness, etc. Any evidence of individual interests in the work of an artist or in the discourse around such works, those of Dan Graham which are revealed in the interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, for example, had been silenced or disavowed by the US-American modernists.

My guess would be that the sort of artist Susan Sontag was looking for, the one “who is interested in ‘everything,’” was also the subject of a postmodernist situation which Sontag had characterized and celebrated in her 1966 *Against Interpretation*: “Art today is a new kind of instrument, an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility. And the means for practicing art have been radically extended [...] All kind of conventionally accepted boundaries have thereby been challenged: not just the one between the ‘scientific’ and the ‘literary-artistic’ cultures or the one between ‘art’ and ‘non-art’; but also many established distinctions within the world of culture itself [...]”[16]

Above, I cited a footnote from Michael Fried’s 1967 essay in which he expresses his utmost horror at such genre-bending and anti-hierarchical criticism, which evoked the “felt need to perpetuate the standards and values of the high art of the past.”[17] The explosion of potential concerns, issues, themes, media and forms of knowledge available to artists in the aftermath of modernist abstraction and formalism necessitated the organization and administration, the strategic positioning of one’s own dispositions and leanings, of one’s “interests” as an artist. Here, I think, lies one of the reasons for the ongoing demand for statements about individual/personal “interests” which circulate among art critics and artists, curators and collectors of contemporary art.

#### IV.

For all of his opposition to Fried and other modernist critics, Judd was too much a modernist himself to endorse the kind of “interest” talk that started to dominate art discourse around the mid-1960s. On the other hand he said things like “I’ve always been interested in making light pieces. I dislike sculptural bulk, weight and massiveness,” and: “I’m interested in ideas I can work with, and the stack proved to have a lot of possibilities” - both citations are drawn from a 1971 interview headlined: “I am interested in static visual art and hate imitation of movement.’ An Interview with Don Judd.”[18]

For quite a while, the interview or conversation has been a regular publishing format in the art press.[19] But the genre acquired greater prominence only during the 1960s, and not only in the US. At this point, I lack sufficient evidence to make definitive claims for the at least partial interdependence between the rise of the “I’m interested” formula and the rise of the interview format within the art world. But my research to date suggests that the tendency on the part of art journalists and critics to inquire into the interests of individual artists has instigated and elicited such responses.

The interpellative and thus subjectivizing character of the questioning of interests may even extend into the realm of *The Psychology of Wants, Interests and Attitudes*— to cite the title of a book published in 1935 by Edward L. Thorndike, a leading psychologist of learning, personality and aptitude testing. [20] In coming to a close, I will keep this very brief, perhaps even too brief, but I would nonetheless like to consider the interrelationship between the artist’s

interview (which revolves around questions of the whereabouts and directions of “interests”) in recent years and the numerous attempts by psychologists since the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries to construct not only “inventories of vocational interest” that would allow individuals to be placed “appropriately” in relation to education and ability, but to construct the individual’s personality on the basis of his or her interests. “Significant symptoms of aptitude may be found in what a person says about his interests,” writes Walter Van Dyke Bingham in his 1937 *Aptitudes and Aptitude Testing*. “These expressions, to be sure, do not always correctly represent his actual interests, nor do his real vocational interests always correspond with his capacity to perform.”[21] But for Bingham and his colleagues in the area of interest research (and their successors are still active today), “it is nevertheless worth while to explore systematically those clues to aptitude discoverable in verbal expression of interest.”

Around the same time, i.e. in the mid-1930s, the philosopher John Dewey defined “interest” in Art as Experience as the “dynamic force in selection and assemblage of materials” that organizes – at times with great effort and pain – the often confused and obscure operations of “intuition” and “inspiration.” “The perceiver, as much as the creator, needs a rich and developed background which, whether it be painting in the field of poetry, or music, cannot be achieved except by consistent nurture of interest.”[22]

Both ways of deploying and engaging “interest” – the experimental psychologist’s search for clues about personality and vocational leanings, or the pragmatic philosopher’s insistence on the necessary managing “force” that guarantees individuality – seem to have had repercussions in the increasing emphasis on interests in contemporary art discourse. This interest in interests takes the form of an investigation – now open, now tacit – into the very grounds of knowledge and experience. Upon which today’s increasingly interdisciplinary and intermedial art relies, as well as an inquiry into the composition of the artist’s personality – which is regarded to a greater and greater extent as being constituted by her or his interests.

Occasionally, however, this quest for interest results in the artist’s deadpan refusal to cater to the desire of the other for information about his interests. “Why was that interesting,” asked the art critic Katrina Martin in a 1980 interview with Jasper Johns. Whereupon Johns responded, laughing: “I don’t know why anything is interesting, Katy.”[23]

\*Only after finishing work on this paper I came across highly pertinent elaborations of the interest in interest topic that touch upon similar references and questions like the ones I am discussing here by Scott Rothkopf („Subject Matter“, in: *Artforum*, vol. 42, no. 9, May 2004, 176-177, 233), Mary Leclère („From Specific Objects to Specific Subjects: Is There (Still) Interest in Pluralism?“, in: *Afterall*, 11, 2005, 9-16) and Howard Singerman, „The Educational Complex: Mike Kelley’s Cultural Studies“, in: *October* 126, Fall 2008, 44-68, in particular 53-54). I’d also like to mention two articles by critic and artist Bruce Boice who engaged with the „interest“ theme early on in his articles „The Quality Problem“ (*Artforum*, vol. 11, no. 2, October 1972, 68-70) and „After the Quality Problem“ (*Artforum*, vol. 11, no. 6, February 1973, 73-75).

- [1] Alfred Schütz to Eric Voegelin [November 1952], in Eric Voegelin, Alfred Schütz, Leo Strauss, Aron Gurwitsch, Briefwechsel über die „Die neue Wissenschaft der Politik“, ed. Peter J. Opitz, Freiburg/Munich: Alber, 1993 [Praktische Philosophie, Vol. 46], 78f.
- [2] [Interview with Dan Graham, New York, 2001], in: Hans Ulrich Obrist, Interviews. Volume I, Milan: Charta, 2003, 327-328.
- [3] Albert O. Hirschman, The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977.
- [4] Art. „Interesse,“ in Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründner, vol. 4, Basel/Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1976, 483.
- [5] Diderot, Art. „Intérêt, s.m. [Littérat.],“ in: Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, first edition, Paris: Briasson [et al.], 1751-1772, vol. 8, 821.
- [6] Cf. Karlheinz Stierle, „Diderots Begriff des „Interessanten,“ in: Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte, vol. XXIII, 1979, 55-76; Niels Werber, Literatur als System. Zur Ausdifferenzierung literarischer Kommunikation, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1992, 68-77.
- [7] Christian Garve, „Einige Gedanken über das Interessirende,“ in: Christian Garve, Popularphilosophische Schriften über literarische, ästhetische und gesellschaftliche Gegenstände, vol. 1, ed. Klaus Wölfel, Stuttgart: Metzler, 1974 [Deutsche Neudrucke, Reihe: Texte des 18. Jahrhundert], 257.
- [8] Immanuel Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgement, transl. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.90.
- [9] Michael Fried, „Art and Objecthood,“ in: Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology, ed. Gregory Battcock, New York: Dutton, 1968, 129.
- [10] Ibid., 130.
- [11] Ibid., 145.
- [12] Ibid., 142; Greenberg quotes on p. 124.
- [13] Donald Judd, Complete Writings 1959-1975, Halifax/New York: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design/New York University Press, 1975, 187.
- [14] Fried, Art and Objecthood, 142.
- [15] Judd, Complete Writings, 198. – see also Thierry De Duve, Kant after Duchamp, London/Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996, 243f.
- [16] Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation and Other Essays, New York: Dell, 1966, 296-7.
- [17] Fried, „Art and Objecthood,“ 142, footnote 16.
- [18] „I am interested in static visual art and hate imitation of movement.“ „An Interview with Don Judd,“ in Artforum, vol. 9, no.10, June 1971, 40-50, here 45.
- [19] Cf. Michael Diers, „Infinite Conversation – Kunstgeschichte als Gespräch und Interview, in Legitimationen: Künstlerinnen und Künstler als Autoritäten der Gegenwartskunst, ed. Julia Gelshorn and Peter J. Schneemann, Bern et.al.: Lang, 2004, 107-123.
- [20] Edward L. Thorndike, The Psychology of Wants, Interests and Attitudes, New York et al.: Appleton-Century Co., 1935.
- [21] Walter Van Dyke Bingham, Aptitudes and Aptitude Testing, New York: Harpers, 1937, 70.
- [22] John Dewey, The Later Works, 1925-1953, Vol. 10: Art as Experience [1934], ed. Jo Ann Boydston, with an introduction by Abraham Kaplan, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987, 271.