

Glossary of Art Terms

The following are a select number of terms relating to the subjects of Modern and Contemporary Art. This glossary is not comprehensive or exhaustive and will be developed and expanded over time.

This Glossary was prepared by Lisa Moran, Curator: Education and Community Programmes and Sophie Byrne, Assistant Curator: Talks and Lectures Programme.

ABSTRACT ART

Artwork that is non-figurative, non-representational and which is concerned with the formal elements of the artwork rather than the representation of subject matter.

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

American abstract art movement in the 1940s and 1950s which emphasised a non-figurative, emotionally engaged approach to painting. Predominantly New York-based, it was also referred to as the New York School. Some artists whose practice emphasised gesture and physical expression, such as the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock or the expressive brushwork of Willem de Kooning, were referred to as action painters or gesture painters. Other artists associated with Abstract Expressionism, such as Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, emphasised the flat surface of the painting through the application of thin layers of paint, the elimination of gesture and emphasis on colour. This approach is referred to as Colour-Field Painting.

ABSTRACTION

The process of making abstract through elimination or avoidance of any representational elements and by emphasising the formal elements of an artwork.

ARCHITECTURE

The discipline concerned with the planning, design and construction of the built environment in terms of its aesthetic, functional and social considerations.

ART FAIR

An event, usually held annually, to network, showcase, market and sell art. Art Fairs have become an important mechanism in the art market for Modern and Contemporary Art. Notable examples include Frieze, ARCO and ArtBasel.

ART MUSEUM

A venue for the collection, preservation, study, interpretation and display of significant cultural objects and artworks.

ART PHOTOGRAPHY

Also known as Fine Art Photography, a category of photography which emphasises the photographer's artistic intentions over the technical or functional aspects of the photograph.

ARTIST-LED INITIATIVES

Projects or organisations, such as studios or galleries, set up and run by artists, often on a collective or cooperative basis.

AUDIO TECHNOLOGY

Devices and mechanisms for recording and producing sound, such as the gramophone, audio cassette, microphone and compact disk.

AVANT-GARDE

French for advance guard or 'vanguard', a military term to describe an advance army group. The term is used to describe innovative, experimental or cutting edge artists and movements.

BAUHAUS

An influential school of art, architecture and design founded by Walter Gropius in Weimar Germany in 1919. Influenced by Constructivism and De Stijl, the Bauhaus style, associated with the International Style, emphasised practicality, harmony between function and design and lack of ornamentation.

BIENNIAL

A large-scale exhibition of international Contemporary Art hosted by many cities every two years. The Venice Biennale was the forerunner of what is now a dominant trend in exhibiting Contemporary Art.

BLAUE REITER

A German expressionist art movement from 1911-1914 which involved Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc which was concerned with spirituality and abstraction. Paul Klee was also associated with this movement.

DIE BRÜCKE

A movement of avant-garde German Expressionist artists formed in 1905, including Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Emil Nolde, who rejected the constraints of the prevalent academic style in favour of a more expressive approach to painting.

CALOTYPE

An early photographic process invented by William Henry Fox Talbot in the 1830s which involved the exposure of paper coated with silver iodide to light, producing a negative image from which multiple positive images could be printed.

CAMERA OBSCURA

An optical device developed used extensively during the Renaissance to aid drawing and perspective.

CINEMATOGRAPHY

The technical term for motion picture photography, which involves the manipulation of the film in the camera, the arrangement of lighting and the printing of the film.

COLLABORATION/COLLABORATIVE ART

A form of arts practice where two or more artists, often from different disciplines, collaborate in the creation of an artwork.

COLLECTOR

Someone who acquires artworks based on personal taste or for investment purposes. Many collectors donate or loan their collections to museums and galleries.

COMMODITY/COMMODIFICATION

A product or article of trade which is marketed for a commercial exchange of equal value. The influence of the art market on the nature, production and distribution of art is often referred to in terms of commodification.

COMMUNITY ARTS

A form of Participatory Arts practice where emphasis is placed on the potential of art to bring about social change. Often involving collaboration between artists and specific communities or self-generated by communities where participants are involved in all aspects of the art making process. The term is associated in particular with socially-engaged arts practice of the 1980s and '90s.

CONCEPTUAL ART

Originating in the 1960s, Conceptual Art emphasises the idea or concept rather than the production of a tangible art object. The ideas and methodologies of Conceptual Art continue to inform Contemporary Art practice.

CONSTRUCTIVISM

An abstract art movement founded by Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko in Russia around 1915, which embraced developments in modern technology and industrialisation.

CONTEMPORARY

Refers to the present or recent past.

CONTEMPORARY ART

Refers to current and very recent art practice. Attributed to the period from the 1970s to the present, it also refers to works of art made by living artists. Contemporary Art can be driven by both theory and ideas, and is also characterised by a blurring of the distinction between art and other categories of cultural experience, such as television, cinema, mass media, entertainment and digital technology.

CRITIC

A person who describes, appraises, analyses and/or critiques art.

CUBISM

An early twentieth-century movement led by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque which focused on the physical qualities of painting rather than the subject matter. It is characterised by the breaking up of the picture plane, merging of figure and ground, the adoption of multiple viewpoints, and simplification of form into geometric shapes. Cubism was very influential on subsequent art movements and artists, and is considered to be the forerunner of Abstract Art.

CURATOR

A person who makes decisions with regard to the selection, acquisition, display and storage of artworks. A curator may be independent or freelance, or may be affiliated with a museum or gallery. A curator of Contemporary Art is concerned with display, research and preservation, but is also involved in experimentation and innovation.

DADA

An international, avant-garde art movement founded in 1916 which used a variety of media, including collage, sound, nonsense texts and absurd performances to protest against the social, cultural and political conditions prevailing in Europe during World War I. Originating in Zurich, the movement spread to Paris, Berlin, Cologne, Hanover and New York.

DAGUERREOTYPE

A photographic process developed by Louis Daguerre in collaboration with Joseph Niépce in the 1830s where an image is etched onto a silver-plated copper sheet after lengthy exposure to light.

DANCE

The movement of the body in a series of prescribed or improvised gestures often accompanied by music. The term also refers to the artform discipline concerned with the theory and practice of dance.

DEALER

An art dealer represents an artist by promoting the artist's work and negotiating opportunities for the artist, such as the exhibition and/or sale of the artist's work.

DE STIJL

Meaning 'style' in Dutch, an art movement founded in 1917 by Theo van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian which emphasised abstraction and purity of form and design. Also known as neoplasticism, De Stijl influenced subsequent developments in art, architecture and design.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

Electronic data storage and transmission technology that enables immense amounts of information to be compressed on small storage devices, such as computers and telephones, that can easily be preserved, retrieved and transported.

DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

A genre of photography applied to the photographic documentation of social, cultural, historical and political events. Traditionally associated with professional photojournalists but more recently, with the proliferation of digital cameras and social media websites, it is associated with amateur photography.

DOCUMENTATION

The process of making records with the use of photography, film, video, audio or text to identify or report factual details.

DRAWING

The process of mark making, often using implements such as pencil, charcoal or pastels, on a two-dimensional surface.

ENVIRONMENTAL ART

A form of arts practice which emerged in the 1960s in response to growing concerns about environmental and ecological issues. Traditionally associated with site-specific and installation practice, contemporary Environmental Art encompasses a broad range of media and methodologies.

EXPRESSIONISM

A form of artistic practice which emphasises the expression of feelings rather than the depiction of reality. Colour, form and the application of paint are employed to convey the artist's feelings. Most notably associated with a number of avant-garde German artists involved in Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter in the early twentieth century.

FAUVISM

From the French 'Fauve' meaning wild beast, a post-impressionist movement in the early twentieth century which placed an emphasis on colour and brushwork rather than pictorial representation. Considered a precursor of abstraction.

FEMINISM

A social, political, intellectual and philosophical movement advocating equal rights and representation for women in all aspects of society.

FILM

The medium used for the creation of still or moving images. The term is also used to describe a motion picture which is a sequence of images projected onto a screen, collectively referred to as cinema. In Contemporary Art, film is referred to as an art form.

FLUXUS

An international, avant-garde art movement in the 1960s which included artists, writers, filmmakers and musicians creating experimental, multimedia work in film, video and performance informed by social and political activism.

FORMALISM

Emphasises the formal elements of an artwork such as the materials and qualities of the work, colour, line, form, etc. External, contextual elements are not considered relevant.

FOUND OBJECTS

The re-use of objects, either manufactured or occurring in nature, which are not designed for artistic purpose, and are kept for their inherent qualities. Often exhibited in random juxtapositions to create new meanings.

FRESCOS

A form of mural painting prevalent during the Renaissance, which involved painting in pigment mixed with water on a thin layer of wet lime mortar or plaster.

FUTURISM

Early twentieth century movement which originated in Italy and embraced all things modern, including technology, speed, industrialisation and mechanisation. It also embraced violence and nationalism and was associated with Italian Fascism.

GALLERY

An internal space or series of spaces dedicated to the exhibition of artworks.

HAPPENINGS

Associated with US artist Allan Kaprow, the term Happenings emerged in the 1950s to describe time-based performances, events or situations which rely on artistic chance and improvisation to provoke the interaction of the audience.

HELIOGRAPH

Early photographic process invented by Joseph Niépce in 1827 which involved exposing a metal plate coated with bitumen to light for long periods of time.

HYBRID

Something of mixed origin or composition.

IMPRESSIONISM

An art movement originating in France in the 1860s which experimented with colour and painting outdoors in the depiction of landscape and everyday life.

INDEXICALITY

A term associated with linguistics and philosophy which refers to a word or phrase whose meaning is contingent on the circumstance or context in which it is expressed.

INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

A period of social, political and economic change arising from the shift from manual to machine-based manufacturing, which affected agriculture, manufacturing, mining and transport. Began in Great Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and spread throughout Europe and America, impacting on all aspects of social, political and cultural life.

INTERIOR DESIGN

The discipline concerned with the planning and design of the interior built environment.

INSTALLATION ART

A broad term applied to a range of arts practice which involves the installation or configuration of objects in a space, where the totality of the objects and the space comprise the artwork.

INTERDISCIPLINARY

The combining of two or more artform specialisms, such as music, visual arts or dance.

INTERIOR DESIGN

The discipline concerned with the planning and design of the interior built environment.

INTERNATIONAL STYLE

A style of architectural design, named after an exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1932 featuring the work of architects associated with the Modern Movement. The International Style was characterised by simplicity of form, lack of ornamentation and use of industrial materials, and is also associated with the Bauhaus.

KINETIC ART

Artworks created using moving components or which suggest movement.

LAND ART

A US art movement from the 1960s which emerged out of environmental and ecological concerns and the perceived limitations of the conventional art object to respond to these concerns. Artworks were created within the landscape, often using the materials of the landscape.

LANGUAGE

The use of verbal and written text as a medium in Conceptual Art.

LENS-BASED MEDIA

Mechanisms which employ a camera lens, such as film, video and photography, to create art work.

LINGUISTICS

The scientific study of language methodologies, such as grammatical structure, perception, meaning, the action and sound of speech, and how these methods are acquired.

LITERARY THEORY

Refers to ideas concerning the reception of literature and text and how the reader may receive and negotiate its meaning based on his/her cultural background and personal experience.

MASS MEDIA

Forms of communication, such as newspapers and television, used to distribute news and information to large audiences.

MASS PRODUCTION

The generation of large quantities of standardised objects associated with industrialisation and mechanised factory production.

MEDIUM/MEDIA

In general usage, media refers to forms of communication, such as newspapers, magazines, television, radio and the Internet. In the arts media — the plural of medium — refers to the materials, methodologies, mechanisms, technologies or devices by which an artwork is realised. Traditional media include painting, sculpture and drawing and the specific materials used, such as paint, charcoal or marble, can also be referred to as media. In Contemporary Art practice media artists use a wide range of media, such as technology, found materials, the body, sound, etc.

MEMORIAL

An object or process to commemorate an individual or event usually sited in a public place. This may take the form of a gravestone, plaque, sculpture, building, cenotaph, park, temporary installation, event or performance.

MINIMALISM

An abstract art movement developed in the US in the 1960s which emphasised the use of simple, geometric forms and modern materials drawn from industry. It was an extension of abstraction focusing on the properties of the materials used but also a rejection of the ideology and discourse of Abstract Expressionism.

MODERN

Generally referring to the present or the contemporary, it is associated with the period of Modernism from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Modern can also be used to describe the period since the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century or the Renaissance in the fifteenth century.

MODERNISM/MODERN ART

Refers to art theory and practice from the 1860s to the late 1960s and is defined in terms of a linear progression of styles, periods and schools, such as Impressionism, Cubism and Abstract Expressionism.

MONUMENT

A structure, such as a statue, building or arch, used to celebrate or commemorate a significant person or event within a society.

MULTIPLES

The production of unlimited editions of an artwork, produced and disseminated at low cost.

NEOCONCRETISM

An influential art movement in Brazil from 1959 and 1961 which rejected the emphasis on formal elements associated with concrete art (non-figurative, abstract art) in favour of a more expressive and participative arts practice.

NEW GENRE PUBLIC ART

A term coined by American artist Suzanne Lacy to describe a form of socially-engaged Public Art practice which emphasises collectivity and the relationship between the audience and the space.

NEW MEDIA

A range of materials and technologies developed relatively recently and utilised in the creation, presentation and dissemination of New Media Art.

NEW MEDIA ART

Artwork created using new media, such as film, video, lens-based media, digital technology, hypertext, cyberspace, audio technology, CD-ROMs, webcams, surveillance technology, wireless telephones, GPS systems, computer and video games and biotechnology.

OBSOLESCENCE (from obsolete)

A state where a product or technology is superseded by a newer one and consequently is no longer manufactured or used, even though it may still function adequately.

OIL PAINT

Form of painting which became prevalent during the fifteenth century, where pigment is suspended in slow-drying oil such as linseed oil.

OP ART/OPTICAL ART

Type of art which employs optical illusions to suggest movement or depth. Informed by colour theory and the psychology of perception, Op Art is usually abstract and often comprises geometric patterns.

PAINTING

The application of a pigment or colour to a surface such as canvas, paper or plaster. It was the dominant artistic medium for pictorial representation until the twentieth century.

PARTICIPATORY ART

A form of arts practice which prioritises viewer participation in the conception and/or realisation of an artwork.

PER CENT FOR ART SCHEME

In Ireland, the Per Cent for Art scheme is a government initiative to provide funding for public art, whereby a percentage of government funding designated for capital expenditure can be set aside to commission a public artwork. Informed by earlier initiatives by the Office of Public Works (OPW) and the Department of the Environment, a Per Cent for Art Scheme across all Government Departments was established in Ireland in 1997. Such schemes operate in Australia and the US and in most European countries.

PERFORMANCE ART

Involves an artist undertaking an action or actions where the artist's body is the medium. Performance art evolved in the late 1950s and is closely associated with Video Art as this was the primary means of recording this ephemeral art form.

PERSPECTIVE

The technique of representing three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface, such as paper or canvas, where the relationship between objects is determined by their distance from the viewer.

PHOTOGRAM

An image produced without the use of a camera by projecting the shadows of objects on photographic paper.

PHOTOGRAPHY

The process of recording an image – a photograph – on light-sensitive film or, in the case of digital photography, via a digital electronic or magnetic memory.

PHOTOGRAVURE

A printmaking process developed in the 1830s which involves creating an intaglio etching from a photographic image created on a light-sensitive copper plate through exposure to light.

PHOTOMONTAGE

The creation of a photographic image by combining parts of a number of separate photographic images. A practice associated in particular with the Dada movement in Berlin in the 1920s.

PICTORIALISM

An approach to photography prevalent in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century which emphasised the pictorial and aesthetic qualities of the image over its documentary characteristics. Photographic artists created images similar to paintings in terms of form and effect, employing a range of techniques such as use of soft focus and manipulation of the printmaking materials to create painterly effects. They also displayed these photographic works in exhibitions similar to the conventional academy exhibitions. Associated with the work of artists such as Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston and Edward Steichen.

POP ART

An art movement which developed in the UK and US in the 1950s drawing on aspects of popular culture and entertainment as subject matter.

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY / POSTCOLONIALISM

An intellectual discourse of the late twentieth century drawing on theories from literature, film, philosophy and social and political science, concerned with the cultural legacy of colonialism in terms of national and cultural identity, race and ethnicity.

POSTMODERNISM

A social, cultural and intellectual movement characterised by a rejection of notions of linear progression, grand totalising narratives and critical consensus associated with Modernism. It is characterised by an interdisciplinary approach, multiple narratives, fragmentation, relativity, contingency and irony.

POSTSTRUCTURALISM

Theories and methods of analysis drawn from Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis which reject the objectivity of Structuralism emphasising the plurality of meaning and the instability of categories of intellectual enquiry. Associated with the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes.

PRINTMAKING

The process of creating an artwork by transferring an impression from one surface to another. Printmaking processes can use metal, stone, linoleum, fabric, etc. While printmaking enables multiple copies to be produced, each print is considered unique.

PROCESS ART

Arts practice where the process of making the artwork is the subject of the work.

PUBLIC ART

Artwork located outside the museum or gallery, usually sited in a public space and supported by public funding.

READYMADE

A term used in manufacturing to distinguish between handmade and manufactured goods, adopted by French artist Marcel Duchamp to describe the selection and modification of a manufactured object by an artist to create an artwork.

RENAISSANCE

A French word for rebirth, the Renaissance was a cultural movement originating in Italy in the late fourteenth century, prompted by the revival of ancient classical sources. Extending until the sixteenth century the movement spread throughout Italy and Europe affecting all aspects of social, political and cultural life. Characterised by the adoption of a humanist approach, Renaissance artists placed an emphasis on naturalism and the use of linear perspective.

SCULPTURE

A three-dimensional art object which is either created or constructed by an artist. Includes constructions, assemblages, installations, sound, new media, etc.

SEMIOTICS

The study of the relationship between signs and symbols in visual and written communication.

SITE

The space in which an artwork is located either temporarily or permanently, such as a gallery space, a space in an art fair or biennial, a public space or a site-specific space where the artwork is created in response to the conditions of the space.

SITE-SPECIFIC ART

Artwork that is created in response to a specific site with the intention of being located in the site and where removal from the site would change the meaning of the artwork. Often associated with Installation Art, Land Art and Public Art.

SITUATIONISM

An open-ended term used to describe an event which is time-based and conditioned by a site or set of circumstances; commonly associated with the political actions of the artist collective Situationist International.

SNAPSHOT

A photograph taken with lack of deliberate aim or consideration of framing, lighting, etc. Characteristics of the snap shot include inadvertant cropping, red-eye, lack of focus, under or over exposure, double exposure.

SOCIALLY-ENGAGED ART

Arts practice which is informed by a social agenda and created and realised through engagement, collaboration and/or participation between an artist or artists and a specific social constituency, such as a youth group.

SOCIAL SCULPTURE

A term devised by German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys to describe a form of socially-engaged arts practice which encompasses human activity and which is underpinned by a belief in the potential for art to bring about social and political change.

SOLARISATION

The reversal of tones in a photographic negative or print caused by overexposure to light where light areas become dark and dark areas become light.

SOUND ART

A form of arts practice concerned with sound, listening and hearing, often involving an interdisciplinary approach. Sound Art encompasses acoustics, electronics, audio media and technology, the body, ambient sound, etc.

STATUE

A three-dimensional object, usually figurative, representing a person or event.

STRAIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY

A term associated with photographers who emphasised the inherent qualities of photography and rejected any form of manipulation or distortion of the image for painterly effects as associated with Pictorialism.

SUPREMATISM

Russian abstract art movement founded by Kasimir Malevich and Alexander Rodchenko around 1915 which emphasised the supremacy of form expressed through the use of a limited range of colours and geometric shapes.

SURREALISM

An anti-establishment, literary and visual art movement founded in 1924 by André Breton and influenced by Dada, Psychoanalysis and Sigmund Freud's theories of the unconscious.

TABLEAU

An elaborate pictorial narrative or story staged and presented in a single image in the form of a painting or photograph.

TABLEAU-VIVANT

A pictorial narrative or story staged and presented in a single image using live subjects who do not move for the duration of the display.

TEXT/TEXT BASED

Artwork created using written or printed words as the material and/or subject matter.

THEATRE

The dramatic arts of writing, producing, directing, performing and presenting dramatic texts such as plays. The term also refers to the artform discipline of drama concerned with the theory and practice of drama.

VIDEO ART

Artwork created using a video recording device. Video Art emerged as an art form in the 1960s and 1970s due to the development of new technology, and it is a prevalent medium in Contemporary Art practice.

VIRTUAL REALITY

A simulated environment generated by computer technology and experienced through sensory stimuli.

WEBCAMS

A video-capture device that can be attached to a computer to enable the communication of live visual information.

WIRELESS TELEPHONES

A cellular or mobile telephone is a type of short-wave analog or digital telecommunication in which a subscriber has a wireless connection from a mobile telephone to a relatively nearby transmitter. The transmitter's span of coverage is called a cell.

WORLD WIDE WEB

A system of interlinked hypertext documents accessed via the Internet. Browsers, such as Google, enable users to access web pages containing text, images and multimedia, and also to navigate between web pages using hypertext.

16-MILLIMETRE FILM

Film stock developed in the 1920s for amateur and industrial use. Since the 1960s, when it became more affordable, it has been used widely by artists in experimental filmmaking.

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